

CENTRAL EUROPEAN CLASSICS

Stefan Żeromski



*The Coming
Spring*

CEU PRESS

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

The Coming Spring

OTHER TITLES IN THE SERIES

Prague Tales

Jan Neruda

Skylark

Dezső Kosztolányi

Be Faithful Unto Death

Zsigmond Móricz

The Doll

Boleslav Prus

The Adventures of Sindbad

Gyula Krúdy

The Sorrowful Eyes of Hannab Karajich

Ivan Olbracht

The Birch Grove and Other Stories

Jaroslav Iwaszkiewicz

The Poet and the Idiot

Friedebert Tuglas

The Coming Spring

Stefan Żeromski

Translated by Bill Johnston



Central European University Press

Budapest • New York

English translation copyright © Bill Johnston 2007

First published in Polish as *Przedwiosnie* in 1924

Published in 2007 by

Central European University Press

An imprint of the

Central European University Share Company

Nádor utca 11, H-1051 Budapest, Hungary

Tel: +36-1-327-3138 or 327-3000

Fax: +36-1-327-3183

E-mail: ceupress@ceu.hu

Website: www.ceupress.com

400 West 59th Street, New York NY 10019, USA

Tel: +1-212-547-6932

Fax: +1-646-557-2416

E-mail: mgreenwald@sorosny.org

This translation was supported by a fellowship
from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored
in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without
the permission of the Publisher.

ISBN 978-963-7326-89-9

ISSN 1418-0162

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Zeromski, Stefan, 1864-1925.

[Przedwiosnie. English]

The Coming Spring / Stefan Zeromski ; translated by Bill Johnston. -- 1st ed.

p. cm. -- (Central European classics)

ISBN 978-9637326899 (pbk.)

I. Johnston, Bill. II. Title. III. Series.

PG7158.Z4P7913 2007

891.8'536--dc22

2007014657

Printed in Hungary by
Akadémiai Nyomda, Martonvásár

Contents

Introduction vii

THE COMING SPRING

A Genealogy 1

Part One

Houses of Glass 13

Part Two

Nawłóć 127

Part Three

The Wind from the East 325

Introduction

The Coming Spring was Stefan Żeromski's last novel. Finished in September 1924, it was published in the last days of that year (with a 1925 publication date); Żeromski died on November 20, 1925.

For most of his life Żeromski had been engaged in the cause of Polish independence and in issues of social justice. He was born in 1864 near Kielce in what is now central Poland and then was in the Russian-occupied partition of the country. His birth during the final throes of the failed January Uprising (1863–64) against the Russians has led to his being dubbed “the posthumous child” of that uprising. He devoted his first novels, *The Labors of Sisyphus* (*Syzyfowe prace*, 1897) and *The Homeless* (*Ludzie bezdomni*, 1900), to social issues such as poverty and to the political struggle for independence under the oppressive rule of the Russian Empire. The heroes and heroines of his novels and stories were often social activists. Subsequent historical novels such as *Ashes* (*Popioły*, 1904) and *The Faithful River* (*Wierna rzeka*, 1912) offered patriotic yet far from uncritical accounts of crucial moments in Polish history.

Independence for Poland finally came in 1919, in the aftermath of World War I. The very model of a com-

The Coming Spring

mitted public intellectual, Żeromski plunged himself into journalistic activity and into work for the newly independent country. By this time he was a nationwide celebrity, and the foremost living author of his time—"the national writer," as leading literary critic Waław Borowy called him. Lionized by the new government, he was showered with honors, culminating in the National Literary Prize in 1922 and, in 1924, the gift of an apartment in the Royal Castle in Warsaw.

Yet despite his shining career, these years were not happy ones for Żeromski. The fledgling country faced vast and overwhelming tasks in every area of public life, from agriculture and industry to health care and social welfare; worse, there were signs that the necessary progress was not being made. It was this frustration that lies at the heart of *The Coming Spring*. Żeromski portrays the early years of the Polish state, not from the point of view of an aging insider like himself, but from that of a young man from the outside, who is able to see the situation with a fresh eye. Furthermore, Cezary Baryka, the hero of the novel, has communist sympathies, which have left him with a particular sensitivity to the position of the poor and downtrodden. The intellectual thrust of the novel draws its power from Baryka's dilemma—he is well aware of the horrors that communism can bring, having witnessed the Russian Revolution at first hand in Azerbaijan and in Russia itself; yet he cannot see a better way of introducing the massive changes that Poland needs.

Baryka's outsider status, and especially his experiences of revolution, offer Żeromski other possibilities too.

Introduction

The central section of the novel, “Nawłóć,” takes place in a country home belonging to a family of landed gentry, the Wielosławskis. This sort of territory was extremely familiar to Polish readers of the time—most notably from *Pan Tadeusz*, Adam Mickiewicz’s masterful epic poem of 1834, which is a nostalgic paean to the delights of life in such a home. Yet Żeromski’s manor house is infused with new and sinister themes. The chilling moment when Cezary grabs a sugar bowl and tries to warn his friend Hipolit that for this object alone, his servants could turn on their masters and murder them—such a moment would have been unthinkable in *Pan Tadeusz*, in which the thoughts and desires of the servants were rarely if ever present, and could never have been conceived of as hostile. In this, Żeromski provides a brilliant intertextual dialogue in which post-Marxian class consciousness, and the historical experience of the Russian Revolution, leads to a radically different re-reading of a familiar literary trope in Polish Romantic literature.

Despite Żeromski’s often rather Gothic turn of phrase and his dramatic imagery, *The Coming Spring* is to a significant extent a faithful portrait of Polish society in the early 1920’s. The author was well informed about the new state, and drew on numerous documentary sources in presenting his picture. Żeromski had long been concerned with the plight of the poor and the destitute, as his earlier novels and short stories clearly show. In *The Coming Spring* we see up close the parlous condition of both urban and rural poor, in Parts Three and Two of the novel respectively. It is obvious that at one level, the

The Coming Spring

book was intended to alert the country to the immense suffering and hopelessness of those least capable of fending for themselves.

As a piece of literature, the novel is not by any means perfect. Many critics have complained that it is somewhat unstructured; some have even suggested that the relatively self-contained “Nawłóć” would function better as a separate novella. The first part of the book contains certain factual errors, and was largely set in a location (Baku, the present-day capital of Azerbaijan) that Żeromski had never visited. The third part, in turn, is journalistic at times. In addition to all this, the author inclined to over-writing, and his style can sound exalted to the present-day ear (as Czesław Miłosz put it in his *History of Polish Literature*, Żeromski was “rather too inclined toward poetry disguised as the narrative of novels”). Nevertheless, the author of *The Coming Spring* knows how to tell a story, and his sincerity, urgency, and eye for the telling detail, combine to produce a narrative that is compelling for all its shortcomings. There are episodes in the book that, even on repeated readings, take one’s breath away.

Perhaps of as much interest as the novel’s literary qualities is the story of its reception in Poland. The publication of *The Coming Spring* unleashed a massive controversy about the book and about Żeromski’s reputation and standing. The author was accused of pro-communist sentiments, of depraving Polish youth, and of anti-Polishness. He came under particular attack by the right-wing Endecja or National Democrats, who were appalled at various aspects of the book, especially

Introduction

its apparent revolutionary leanings. Żeromski was accused by many of having communist sympathies himself, and of being an apologist for terrorism and revolution. (This accusation was, of course, all the more harsh in light of the fact that only a couple of years earlier, Poland had been at war with the Soviet Union—as Żeromski describes at the beginning of Part Two of *The Coming Spring*.) Some even called for his National Literary Prize to be revoked. At the same time, certain extreme right-wing anti-Semites congratulated him on identifying the root of the issue as the “Jewish problem” (which was not at all the author’s intention); others of the same camp berated him for not properly depicting the Jewish threat. As if these attacks and misrepresentations were not enough, Żeromski was sued for libel by Leon Kajdan, the chief of police mentioned by name in Part Three of the book and accused of torturing political prisoners.

Upon reflection, we should see that such reactions in fact ironically point to a richer understanding of the book. *The Coming Spring* is a great novel precisely because it is *not* communist propaganda (just as it is equally not an anti-Jewish diatribe). Żeromski was fully aware of the pitfalls of communism—surely no more evidence is needed of this than the wrenching descriptions of the October Revolution and the emerging Soviet system in Part One of the book. Yet he had the intellectual courage to ask himself: What might a young, disaffected individual—even one who had seen the horrors of revolution up close—find attractive about communism in present-day Poland? This novel provides an answer. It was a

The Coming Spring

hugely painful one for Żeromski and for those of his generation who had fought so hard for the country's independence. But Żeromski had the intellectual honesty and clarity to see that for a committed yet impatient young person like Baryka, the patriotic rhetoric of pre-independence Poland had little value when poverty, inequality, and injustice stared one in the face. The character of Gajowiec is often seen as a *porte-parole* for Żeromski himself; yet characteristically, if the author did indeed insert himself into the novel in such a way, he made it very clear that his own words and arguments were unconvincing to his hero, and often for good reason.

Is *The Coming Spring* ultimately an optimistic novel? The (ambiguous) answer to this question lies in its title. The Polish title, *Przedwiośnie*, is one word—a noun referring to the period of the year, usually in early March, when winter is clearly over yet the spring has not begun. (German has an equivalent—*Vorfrühling*—but English does not; an inelegant but accurate rendering might be “the pre-spring.”) This would imply that, in fact, things will get better, and that the manifold problems described in the pages of the novel are but a passing phase. Yet the title might equally well be ironic. It seems to have been taken from the vocabulary of Gajowiec, or indeed of the communists, rather than of Żeromski's antagonist Cezary Baryka himself. In this regard, we must accept that the author does not make it clear to what extent he believes we should have grounds for hope.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the novel has a great deal to say to the contemporary world. The aftermath of 1989 was not unlike the upheavals following the

Introduction

First World War—both periods saw the collapse of empires and the emergence of many new nation states from the rubble. In both cases, the euphoria of independence was soon followed by the realization that self-determination did little if anything to help solve profound social and political problems. This is nowhere more true than in Poland itself, where the postcommunist period has been marked by huge difficulties in such areas as employment, health care, and governmental oversight. It has also seen a proliferation of rhetorical posturing that obscures the true nature of the issues. As befits a novelist, Żeromski offers no easy solutions to these troubles; his contribution is to have had the courage to look beyond the rhetoric and to depict the life of a newly independent country as it really was.

Bill Johnston
Bloomington, Indiana
January 2007

This work is dedicated
to Mr. Konrad Czarnocki¹
as a token of friendship

Stefan Żeromski

¹ An attaché at the Polish embassy in Sweden in the years 1919–1924, who took an active part in the attempts to nominate Żeromski for the Nobel Prize; he and Żeromski corresponded at length during this time.

A Genealogy

I t's not a question here, dammit, of a coat of arms! Nor of a long line of ancestors with the backs of their heads shaved in the old noble style, sporting drooping Sarmatian¹ moustaches and curved swords; nor of coiffured great-grandmamas in low-cut dresses. A father and a mother—that was the entire genealogy, as it often is in our land in the stories of modern people without a past. One grandfather must be mentioned, and one sole great-grandfather ought to be noted. We wish to respect the aversion, saturated with a Semitic spirit and partiality, that modern people feel toward burdening their memory with the knowledge of which church or which cemetery a given forefather is buried in.

So then—the father bore the surname Baryka and the Christian name Seweryn, which out in the expanses of Russia did not grate overly upon the ear. “Severyan Grigorevich Baryka”—it attracted no attention and went unnoticed. The mother was invisible, alone unto herself—a very ordinary Jadwiga Dąbrowska from Siedlce.

¹ In the traditional Polish style.

The Coming Spring

She had spent almost her whole life in a slew of different provinces and districts of Russia, yet had never learned the Russian language well, and in her mind she continued to dwell not in the Urals or Baku, not in Symbirsk or even Tula, but back in Siedlce. It was in Siedlce alone—though her information came only from letters and newspapers—where things took place that were important and interesting, that were worthy objects for her emotions, her memory, and her longing. Everything else, aside from her husband and her son, was an incidental, temporary, transient combination of events and things that made her yearn all the more for her Siedlce. Once, in an exquisite town named Zykh, an oasis in the desert of oilfields that was Baku, on the bay of the Apsheron peninsula, fragrant with southern flowers and plants, where the limpid sea fills the shadowy groves of the coast with a soft murmur—Mrs. Baryka had nothing more pressing to say than to remark that in Sekuła near Siedlce there was “also” a very beautiful pond, and in addition in Rakowiec there were meadows that really were more beautiful than anything in the world, and that when the moonlight shone on the Muchawka and was reflected in the millpool. . . There followed the inevitable snuffling during a protracted recollection of the charms of some waterlogged meadows near Iganie, the Stoczek woods, and even the main road to Mordy, which—God help us!—as she remembered it, was replete not only with mud, dust, and permanent potholes, but also with enchantment.

Immediately upon her arrival in Russia, when she was newly married, Mrs. Jadwiga Baryka (née Dąbrowska)

had made a name for herself in the local Polish community by means of a conversation she had had with a coachman driving her across Moscow. As the carriage in which she was riding jolted unmercifully over the uneven pavement, the driver merely sitting there on his box, ceremonially and as it happens officially bulging in every direction, she berated the fellow in faulty Russian: “*You’ve an awful lot of pant-holes here!*” She repeated this rebuke once, twice, and a third time as she grew more and more impatient, until there came the catastrophic moment. The coachman kept looking round at her indignantly, till she repeated her complaint about the “pant-holes” one more time, at which point he stopped his gray horse and yelled:

*“What do you keep going on about my pants for, ma’am! So they’re full of holes! Damn it, woman! So they’re full of holes. What the hell is it to you!”*²

Another time, by now the wife of a highly placed executive, in seeking to do what she could to help her husband succeed and win promotion she put a veritable spoke in his wheel with her inadequate command of the finer points of the Russian tongue. It was at a public ball in a provincial capital in the foothills of the Urals. The occasion was graced by the presence of the governor of the province along with his teenage daughter. After one of the waltzes Mrs. Baryka had the good fortune to find herself next to this daughter and wished to engage in pleasant conversation with the future successor of the

² Italics indicate that the text is in Russian in the original.

The Coming Spring

local potentate. She hoped to take advantage of the moment and assist her husband by winning the favors of the governor's daughter. But she couldn't think how to begin the conversation; she kept hesitating, at a loss what to say.... At last something came to mind! Noticing a beautiful rose pinned to the delightful girl's bodice, Mrs. Baryka exclaimed in a transport of admiration and endless adoring smiles:

"What a lovely red nose you have!"

She was utterly astonished, nay, horrified, when the gubernatorial offspring started calling to her father in a languid, painful, fluty voice:

"Papa! Papa! I'm being insulted!"

How could Mrs. Jadwiga Baryka (née Dąbrowska) have known that one little letter could make such a difference!

As for her engagement and marriage to Seweryn Baryka, it had taken place in a most unusual way.

Already well-situated, healthy, and in the prime of life, the handsome "young man" had decided to marry, in his home country of course. He took a month's leave and in the time he had at his disposal, minus the traveling, he arranged everything: he found himself a life companion, wooed in the appropriate fashion, won the consent of her parents, "was reciprocated" (though the young lady wept bitterly for something or someone), got married, completed the return journey and was not one minute late in resuming his position in the foothills of the central Urals.

Seweryn Baryka had not had any special education in his youth and did not have a particular profession. When

A Genealogy

the time had come for it, he had not much felt like occupying his head with learning, and subsequently things had fallen out in such a way that it was too late to undertake specific studies. For quite some time, then, he was that common sort of person who seeks any employment whatsoever. When he found something that was not quite right for him, on the quiet he would look around for something more profitable, in any field. He was concerned only with the size of his salary and with having an apartment, heating, lighting, dividends and suchlike supplements; what he did for those dividends was a matter of complete indifference to him. It should be added that Seweryn Baryka was a man of the most unalloyed honesty, and for the highest salary and the largest apartment he would not have done anything improper. But within the boundaries the middle-class eye sets up between good and evil in this world, he was prepared to undertake anything that his “elders and betters” instructed him to.

Pre-war Russia was an ideal arena for people of this type to make money, especially those who came from “the Kingdom.”³ The knowledge they had acquired in grammar school, their innate intelligence, which accompanies the seeker of a post along with his health and springs up at a moment’s notice, unsown and untended; endurance, courage, cheerfulness and a hint of scorn for the “Russki” for whom one works, yet whom one nevertheless controls—all these things paved the way from

³ I.e. the Congress Kingdom of Poland—an earlier name for the part of Poland that fell under the Russian partition.

The Coming Spring

lower to higher positions. It must be acknowledged that a not unimportant part in all this was played by connections—quiet, humble well-wishers leading one by the hand from lower-placed countrymen to those ever higher up, who had a foot or an elbow firmly planted on that Russian ladder.

Within a short time from the moment of the wedding in Siedlce, Seweryn Baryka was not only the father of a handsome child—who was christened Cezary Grzegorz—but was also a newly wealthy man with money in the bank. In fairness it must be said that he led a quiet life and did not spend his money on just anything. He scraped and saved, amassing if not actual currency in gold, then objects: furniture, carpets, jewelry, even paintings, even books—not necessarily to pore over them, but rather as valuables. Yet when the need arose to mingle in refined and well-read circles, there also arose the unavoidable necessity of reading those expensive Polish rarities in their sumptuous bindings. From these repeated readings, in turn, a certain spirit entered his life, hovering there like a faint, subtle, and indistinct aroma.

Among the volumes bound magnificently in gilded leather, stamped, and with inscribed titles, there was one small, inconspicuous tome that was looked after with especial solicitude, like the most valuable jewel in a treasury. It was a short memoir from the 1831 uprising,⁴ written and published anonymously outside Poland and concerning General Józef Dwernicki's expedition to

⁴ The November Uprising of 1830–1831 in the Russian partition.

Beresteczko and Radziwiłłów. Amid the endless vicissitudes, described in great detail and in a most confused manner, on page thirty-seven there appeared the information that among the fifteen citizens of Rus who joined the uprising and supported it with their entire estate, there was a certain Kalikst Grzegorz Baryka, owner of Sołowijówka and adjoining properties. This was Seweryn Baryka's grandfather in a direct line. Grandfather Kalikst had, as the saying goes, done terribly out of his involvement in the uprising. Following the Battle of Boremle on the Styr River, General Dwernicki had been under pressure from the superior forces of the Russian General Rüdiger and at Lulińce had been forced to cross the dry border into Austrian Galicia; the Russian government subsequently brought their unmitigated fury down upon all those who had supported the rebellion. Sołowijówka was confiscated; the family home was first thoroughly looted, then razed to the ground, and grandfather Kalikst had to leave on the last horse from his once-rich stables and enter a dark and drab world of post-uprising poverty—from being a master he became a pauper who had to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow in foreign lands.

The text containing this information—presented dryly and without sentimentality yet in some detail—had been bracketed on both sides of the page by the son of grandfather Kalikst and the father of Seweryn. For the latter two individuals, all that remained of the aforementioned Sołowijówka and adjoining properties was the version given in the slim little book and a legend passed down by word of mouth. Sołowijówka became a family

The Coming Spring

myth, a tale told in constantly changing ways, about something distant, illustrious, noble, and immense.

The legend alone, as is usually the case with legends, magnified grandfather's wealth, multiplied his possessions, and gave his deeds the rank of almost superhuman achievement. A dry note in an obscure memoir by a nameless author became a spindle on which was wound the slender, priceless, mysterious thread of faith of his scions. They believed that in some way they were superior, and this gave them pride. On the title page of the book Seweryn's father had written in large letters an instruction that may have been addressed to his only son, or perhaps to a whole series of descendants: "Guard this with your life!"

And indeed Seweryn Baryka guarded the book with his life. It traveled with him the length and breadth of Russia, lying quietly at the bottom of his trunk among his dirty shirts and used underwear, alongside unlovely socks and drafts of letters of application to various dignitaries, when the heir of that splendid and impulsive grandfather was poor as a church mouse. Later it was kept in the drawer of a small table along with his most important documents. It then found its way into the briefcase of a businessman, a secret compartment in a dignitary's desk, and finally into a glass-doored cabinet crammed with bronzes, costly antiques, rare editions and fine bindings.

It cannot be said that the contents of the little historical diary had any especially deep connection with Seweryn Baryka's spiritual life. Yet it was a distant, dream-like, and alluring presence in that life. The book con-

A Genealogy

tained something as if from a religion that one does not even profess or practice, yet which one respectfully tolerates. It contained something of the scent of a spring-time flower, which a strong, practical person busy with his affairs does not notice even if he looks at it, but which all the same gazes at him faithfully from low down in the shade, and all the same pours out its fragrance in his direction. Furthermore, a certain family pride and secret ambition had grown up around the modest little book: they hadn't come from nowhere, hang it, like one of those people whom one encounters during one's career and to whom one has to bow down to the ground.

Moving from lower to higher posts, and dwelling in various cities in turn, Seweryn Baryka eventually found himself in Baku, in the oil "mines" as the Russians called them; by now he was a senior executive with a whole department under his control. His former humble quarters had been exchanged for a splendid apartment whose tiled floors were covered with Persian carpets. On the carpets stood furniture that was nothing artistic but was simply expensive, beneath costly Caucasian silks. Thick cloths lay on the tables, while the walls were decorated with genuine "hand-painted" oils by painters whose work cost as much in the furniture stores as the furniture itself. A multitude of gold and silver dishes were kept in oak and walnut cabinets as massive as castle ramparts.

Seweryn Baryka had continued through the years to lead a life of moderation, and had amassed savings of several hundred thousand roubles, set aside in the bank

The Coming Spring

for a rainy day. He was a highly regarded figure, a dependable individual who enjoyed the respect of all those in the world into which fate had thrown him. He had become a prominent member of the Polish community. His quiet wife, who constantly and ever more insistently sniveled for her home town, had such an influence on her husband that at times...occasionally...he toyed with the idea of returning to Poland, moving his hearth to the banks of the Vistula, and taking up some more permanent job there. But his excellent position in Baku, the money flowing into his coffers in a veritable stream—wellbeing, tranquility—and last but not least this land of milk and honey—all combined to keep him where he was. He had even begun to grow accustomed to his prosperity in this particular place. A warm climate, wonderful and extraordinarily cheap southern fruits, gorgeous silks to be had for a song, inexpensive labor, the opportunity of spending the hot season in Zyk, the comfort and opulence of his home life—all caused him to remain in this country. Unconsciously or subconsciously he was also kept in place by his attachment to the entire system of relations that existed, and to the tremendous might of tsarist Russia, upon which one sat like a fly on a harness that fitted tightly round the neck and sides of a wild, foreign steed.

And so from year to year, musing about a return to Poland and at the same time lining his nest with gold and silver feathers, Seweryn Baryka put all his heart and soul into his little son Cezary or Czarus, a stout and healthy young fellow. From his earliest years the boy had the most expensive teachers of French, English, Ger-

A Genealogy

man, and Polish, and the best and most costly private tutors when he went to grammar school. He was a very good student, and would have been outstanding if his adoring parents had not interfered, with their worries that he might work too much and exhaust himself. In the snug study with its carpet so soft that one's foot was swallowed up in it, as often as possible father and son spent delightful time alone together. When the lad was in first grade, he would lie on his father's breast, his head by his father's, and they would swing back and forth in the rocking chair and kiss their way through the multiplication table or a French fable that the strict French teacher had set for the next day; or they would repeat over and again some short rhyme in Polish so as not to forget the proper pronunciation of that difficult tongue. School had its own influence. Czarus' spoke Russian infinitely better than Polish. It made no difference that only Polish was used at home, nor that all the maids were Polish. The lady of the house quite obviously could not have contributed to her son's russification. Nor could his father; though he fully understood the necessity of knowing the language of the country and placed great importance on such knowledge, by this time he had already begun to have a yen for that delicate, soft, familiar something that came from a distant land. But life itself, imbued with the Russian spirit, took its course.

And thus Czarus's days passed in the arms of his father and mother, on their laps, and before their adoring eyes.

PART ONE

Houses of Glass

Czaruś had just turned fourteen and graduated from the fourth class to the fifth when Seweryn Baryka was called up to serve as an officer in the reserve. War had broken out. Rapidly, in the space of a few days, the family idyll was shattered. Cezary found himself alone with his mother in a fatherless apartment. Accompanying his father to the troop ship leaving for Astrakhan, he had felt no sorrow whatsoever. It was a novelty! He was occupied by a thousand trifling details—dates, names, and figures, in connection with his father's donning the uniform of an officer. He packed his father's magnificent yellow leather suitcase with its metal fittings, stamped monogram, and abundance of mysterious compartments within. He neither shared nor understood his mother's desperate tears and sobbing, which lasted from morning till night. It was only when his father was on board in the company of other officers, and he was left alone on shore with his mother, and the gangway was pulled away with a clatter—only then was Czaruś overcome by a terror he had never in his life known before. Under the influence of this feeling he stretched out his arms and started shouting like a true child. But the reassuring gestures

The Coming Spring

that his father's white hands formed in the air calmed him as instantly as that youthful blind pain had struck. It would only be for a short time! Just for maneuvers! The war would be over soon. Just a few weeks. Maybe a month. Two at the most. The Russian steamroller would flatten the enemies' fields, crushing obstacles as if they were carrots or corn, and all would return to normal. That was what everyone was saying, and such an opinion Cezary too had inherited from his departing father.

Returning home from the port with his mother, who was truly as silent as the grave, Cezary was already in a cheerful mood. He was happy about various things, above all the prospect of freedom. His father never ever punished him nor even scolded him; he would tell him off half-jokingly, gently making fun of him. Yet he possessed an unbreakable iron power over his son. Despite his father's mild-mannered smile, despite his polite suggestions and respectful advice, and his good-natured requests made during blandishments and games—no resistance was possible. These were canons and clauses of the will, imposed with a smile amid caresses. It was a despotic rule and an autocracy so firm that nothing, literally nothing, could overcome it. Now that iron band had loosened and fallen away of its own accord. The fearful panic in his mother's eyes—"What will your father say?"—had disappeared. His father was gone from the apartment and from the world, and his absence said: "Do what you will!"

This freedom delighted Czarus. It terrified his mother.

“What’s going to happen now?” she kept whispering as she wrung her hands.

Cezary asked no such questions. He promised his mother he would be obedient, just as if his father were present in his study. He had decided to behave, and reassured his mother with a thousand tender caresses. But deep down, his soul and body were bursting to cut loose. What he couldn’t obtain from his mother with willful caprices, he wheedled out of her by charm or by making a scene. Now he got his own way. He did what he felt like. He no longer perceived the boundaries that he had previously been forbidden to cross, and he threw himself left and right, backwards and forwards—so as to take a good look at everything that before had been proscribed. He spent entire days away from home getting up to mischief with his pals, playing games, having adventures and prowling about. When the vacation ended he “attended” grammar school and as before he had French and German, English and Polish lessons at home; but now it was little more than a series of arguments, sometimes even fights. He locked horns with every one of his schoolteachers, started quarrels and conducted endless judicial proceedings, for he constantly experienced “injustices” and “wrongs” that, as a person of honor, he had to avenge in a manner that was both appropriate and recognized as such by the competent authorities, that is to say, his “old” chums in the fifth class. Games—innocent ones, as it happens—gadding about and rascality absorbed him like some element. In the company of a few old friends he skipped his lessons and roved the neighborhood; he even roamed at night

The Coming Spring

through the streets, the ravines, and the pathless tracts, among the remains of Zoroastrian temples and the ruins of old mosques.¹

Once he had broken free of the paternal halter he could tolerate no restraint. His poor mother was at a complete loss; she swam in tears and faded away in her anxiety. At the sight of those bitter tears, which bothered him profoundly, Cezary would improve for a day, at the very most two. On the third he was already up to his tricks again. He would break the Tartars² windows, or clamber onto the flat roofs of the apartment buildings and, unseen, fire his slingshot at the occupants. Elsewhere he drilled a hole in the back wall of a house so that he could spy on the “wives” of a Muslim millionaire as they walked about a treeless yard without their yashmaks or silk veils covering their faces. Another time he organized a caterwauling for a teacher he loathed. At night he would wander without purpose or sense along the unfinished boulevards of the new city, or like a stray dog would simply maunder about the alleyways and the steep, narrow streets of the old town; he would hang about the port or in the filth and fumes of the “black town,” as the industrial area was known, or gad about among the geysers spewing salty mud. The need to roam, to career from place to place without rhyme or

¹ In fact there were no such remains and ruins in Baku. Żeromski had never been there and the information he had about Azerbaijan was not all accurate.

² Żeromski uses the word “Tartars” to refer to the Azeris; I have followed this practice in the translation.

reason, became a passion and a compulsion. He could not sit in one place. On top of that were games. He played ball, he played strips and pebbles, he played tip-cat, and he threw worn Georgian dice.

Yet Cezary's idle days were filled not just with any occupation whatsoever. He was learning his part in a theater of friends, for a drama of brigandage that was to be played out in secret among the remains of the old fortifications of Baku. There, with the others he constructed hiding places in the caves of the rock and in the labyrinth of old walls where they could conceal forbidden literature—obscene poems by Pushkin and other pornographers.³ Here too was secreted an ancient revolver without ammunition, and a decorative Georgian kinjal or double-edged dagger, whose stabs “for the moment” were not intended for anyone in particular. Both the revolver and the dagger, folded in colored tissue paper and frequently rewrapped, patiently awaited their destiny. In the meantime, attacks on the bourgeoisie of both Tatar and Armenian persuasion were organized with weaponry of a less military nature—for breaking windows garden variety rocks sufficed.

Cezary's mother was incapable of confining her son at home, ordering him to change his dissolute ways, keeping an eye on him, or tracking down his hiding

³ Żeromski got into all sorts of trouble because of this line. Mikhail Artsybashev, a Russian émigré writer living at that time in Poland, wrote an open letter to Żeromski protesting against his description of Pushkin as a “pornographer.” In his reply Żeromski explained that the word, like much of the narration in the novel, belongs to the perspective of Cezary Baryka, not that of the author.

The Coming Spring

places. She spent almost all her time waiting for him to come home. Whenever he grabbed his cap and rushed from the apartment, something rose to her throat and took her voice away. She no longer had the strength to ask the rascal not to leave. At first he pretended to do what he was told: he would sit still, be nice to her, and beg her permission to go out and play. Later he grew bolder and more self-assured. In time he became impertinent, derisive, sarcastic, quarrelsome and aggressive. And in the end he began to ignore his mother completely. She gritted her teeth and was silent, worrying for hours on end about her only child.

This foreign city became for her even more foreign—alien, incomprehensible, dangerous, and ominous. After Seweryn left she became afraid of everything here. While her husband was still at home, he was a person, she merely the quiet and humble shadow of that person. Now the shadow had to become an active figure. The shadow had to acquire will, power, decision. How odious was that necessity, how onerous! She had to know everything, anticipate, prevent, give instructions. She lost herself in the confusion of her duties. She didn't know where to begin, where her path was or how she should follow it. She was ashamed and anxious. She experienced one of the harshest kinds of torture—the torture of action imposed on one who is powerless and passive. She was unable to cope, and she suffered because of it. Her concern for her son, who as if out of spite had turned against her, was the last straw. The only relief she found was in the night, when the boy was sound asleep. At such times she could hear his breathing and she knew

he was by her and was in no danger. She herself, however, did not sleep then. She suffered from insomnia. Yet she preferred the sleeplessness of nighttime to the anxiety of the day. Oh, how she loved to lie still on his bed, to curl into the corner and gaze at the boy's lovely head, swathed in a shock of wavy hair, and, as she gazed, to lose herself in reveries about him! How lovely, how adorable was that rascal, that scamp, that gadabout and good-for-nothing!

And what did he dream about—what was going on beneath that delightful straight forehead? What was being seen by those eyes, tight shut under their dark-lashed lids? Some passionate cry comes from his pulsing throat! Some furious, untamed spectacle is taking place before him, for his straight nose tautens like a bowstring; his nostrils quiver and his incomparable lips bare the dread and menace of his beautiful white teeth! What a wolf he is! What unbridled passion lies in that child's sleepy smile! And as she gazed at her only child's face, she fell deep in thought: Who on earth was this boy, in fact? An inscrutable mystery had conceived him within her. He had been small and helpless—a tiny scrap of flesh and blood, a being entirely reliant on her—a fragment of her whole, as if a new organ of her body, an arm or a leg... She had fed him, cared for him, brought him up. From year to year he grew in her arms, before her eyes, in her embrace. His every day depended on her, began from her and finished with her. She poured her strength into him, transferring her life force to him drop by drop. She gave direction to the ways of his blood and set them straight. She enabled him to speak, shout, sing. And now

The Coming Spring

he was becoming alien and sinister. He was turning against her. Something bad flowed from him toward her. Her boundless love for him was being transformed and diluted into wrongs committed upon her weak body and feeble spirit. If she had not loved him so boundlessly, what difference would it have made to her even if he had gone completely to the dogs and had gotten up to whatever mischief he felt like? But he was striking at her love, and buffeting her with that power with which the paltry remnants of her strength had endowed him.

Often, the day would be breaking by the time she fell into a shallow half-sleep, a brief oblivion in which she was still semi-vigilant. She was awakened by every one of the boy's movements, every time he snored or talked in his sleep. In such states of semi-consciousness she always took refuge from these foreign places "at home," in other words in Siedlce. She heard in the depths of her mind the rumble of a train's wheels and saw the immeasurable expanse of the fields, wildernesses, and pastures of this immense land—Russia—which was her prison. A secret, joyful, truly thievish dream suggested the details of the act: she would take Czarus', pack a few things in a bundle and make a run for it. Escape from this exile! Run away! She knew each time she awoke that it was impossible and could never happen—that Seweryn would never consent to it. Would he not have the right to say that she had run away because Szymon Gajowiec was in Siedlce?

That name had a magic power for her. It conjured up long-ago spring mornings and summer days that were no more. Once again she was seventeen and had that joy

in her heart that was no more. Knowing perfectly well that it was absolutely ridiculous nonsense, she was once again herself, the young girl of long ago. Once again she loved Szymon Gajowiec in secret, furtively, utterly—just like then. Once again she was utterly loved by that slim, beautiful young man—just like then. She lived her wordless romance. Once again she waited for his declaration—long and longingly. But he never said a word to her! Not one sigh, not one syllable! It was only in his dark, deep eyes that love burned. Oh, it was not a romance, not a crush, not a blithe flirtation, but somber love. How could he be so bold as to declare his love for her, a “young lady of good family” in Siedlce, while he was a poor clerk in the provincial government, who came moreover from the peasantry or minor impoverished gentry somewhere in Podlasie?⁴ And so he remained silent, till it was too late! Seweryn arrived and she was given away without discussion. Once again she recalled leaving with her husband for Russia. There she was, standing in the window of the train, a smiling, happy young wife. There were lots of people, all her friends and acquaintances—the whole town. Chatter, flowers, embraces, greetings, wishes. And at the end of the platform, far off, all alone, leaning on a windowsill—him. A moan rent her soul anew. She saw his eyes and his smile, filled with mortal anguish.

She recalled the long-ago magical moments when they would take walks together by the pond in Sekuła, the

⁴ A region in the east of Poland.

The Coming Spring

pond covered with water lilies that was so fixed in her memory. She remembered every word of his from those times—their quiet conversation about the oppression of the Podlasie Uniates,⁵ about the torture, the beatings, and the coercion. His soul contained as it were a chapel to the Uniate Church in Podlasie, and to that whole land filled with sorrow and mystery. He alone knew everything; he had read it all in the official files and government papers and in confidential reports. He alone stood over the roads of that land like a solitary cross. And it was to her alone that he entrusted his secrets. And then she betrayed him....She recalled an outing to Drohiczyn, by rack wagon, in the company of a large group of young people. How merry it was, and how springtime filled their souls!

On the way they made a stop at a little old Uniat chapel, abandoned and marked for demolition. She recalled Gajowiec's eyes, raised toward the painting from the previous century at the far end of the chapel. Oh Lord, she had spurned that man, trampled him underfoot, put his soul to death!...For the thousandth time she recalled the agonizing letter he had written when the news spread that she was marrying Seweryn—a letter six pages long, imploring, begging, tear-stained, delirious. At the time she had torn it into shreds, but the words of that letter lived on in her soul. She read them in her soul, as she had then in the attic, when she had torn her hair out, swooning from despair. At the mention of the

⁵ The Uniates of Podlasie were Greco-Catholics. In 1875 the tsarist authorities forced them to convert to the Eastern Orthodox church.

name of that man, whose hand she had never shaken, to whom she had never said an endearing word, the spring of her homeland blossomed in her soul. It was he who had been her teacher, her guide, her quiet master—oh, and her chosen one of all the people on earth! Everything had passed, and a great distance had opened up in time and in space; Czarus had been born; but that man had not died in her soul. And even if he no longer existed on earth, she blessed his memory....

Letters arrived with some frequency from her husband. He was at the front, somewhere in East Prussia,⁶ near the Mazurian Lakes. His letters were unvarying, almost official in nature, dry; they always included the same expressions. Naturally she did not complain about her son to him—quite the opposite, she untruthfully praised him for virtues he did not display in the slightest. In his letters Cezary's father thanked him for his commendable behavior and for his progress at school. His mother read these passages out loud to the obdurate recidivist and for a short while obtained something along the lines of contrition and repentance for his sins. But the moment one of his pals, some Misha or Kolya, whistled beneath his window, that was the end of the contrition and the firm resolution to improve!

There was only one time when something got through to Cezary. By custom the local Catholic chapel would hold choral singing on Sundays. Cezary had a fine

⁶ The region on the Baltic to the east of Gdańsk, around Königsberg (today Kaliningrad); at the time of the First World War it was part of Germany.

The Coming Spring

voice and had already sung solo several times, to the accompaniment of the harmonium. The priest, a Georgian brought up in the depths of Russia and ill-disposed toward Poles, did not willingly consent to this singing, but he tolerated it because of the large Polish community. One fall morning, during the choir session Cezary sang an old, standard hymn:

*O Lord, who hold our human fate
In hand, hear this our prayer:
Take those who wait at heaven's gate
And keep them in your care.*

As he sang away spiritedly on his own, something seized him by the heart. An inconceivable, hollow yearning for his father reached into the furthest depths of his soul. He felt that at any moment he would burst out weeping. His singing became moving and beautiful beyond words. The old, tired, drunken official on the harmonium, who had forgotten much of his Polish, was barely able to keep up with the accompaniment. His fingers trembling, he pounced on the notes so as not to lose anything, so as—God forbid!—not to spoil anything in this hymn, which had become a superhuman prophesy, a veritable prayer to the Lord. It seemed to the congregation that a heavenly angel had descended from one of the church paintings to stand by the clavichord and offer a hymn of entreaty for all sinners.

This church mood, however, left as quickly as it had come. Outside the walls of the chapel Czarus was himself, or rather he was in the grip of a shared frenzy that

had overcome him and his friends. His longing for his father, profound and irresistible, ran up against the fear that he might return. The huge bubble of freedom would burst right away. Once again he'd have to lie doggo, act sanctimonious and well-behaved and hard-working, as if all he thought about was schoolwork and lessons. Then there'd be no question of his own will, of running wild wherever he felt like it, or of that insatiable intoxication with air that young people experience when they break loose of all restraint.

In fact, this breaking loose would often take on oddly commonplace forms. The friends would gather at the home of one of their fellow idlers and, as if in great secrecy, would sing the most hackneyed Russian songs. After the singing there followed cards. One or another of them was in love. Cezary was not yet one of these, but he knew that such a condition existed and that it was in fashion.

Seweryn Baryka did not defeat the Germans in the vicinity of the Mazurian Lakes. On the contrary—he bolted east with the rest of the army. For a long time there was no news from him, and when it finally came, it was from somewhere entirely different. He was in the Carpathians and was pushing into Hungary. From there he sent information that was just as dry and straightforward as before. Each letter began with questions about Cezary and finished with endless greetings to him. Not a word, not a mention of his return! Battles, sieges, marches, snows, valleys and mountains—mountains that Cezary looked for in vain in the atlas.

*

The Coming Spring

The situation of Seweryn Baryka's wife and son was assured. His officer's salary alone, which was paid punctually, would have entirely sufficed. In addition, before leaving for the front Seweryn had removed from safe deposit in the bank a significant portion of his savings, converted it into gold and "just in case" had buried it in the cellar along with some jewelry and certain of their more valuable silver and gold objects. The money alone amounted to several hundred thousand roubles. At the burial ceremony, which took place at night with the appropriate planning and caution, Mrs. Baryka and Cezary had been present. The part of the capital that had remained in the bank, again "just in case," was for day-to-day use and could be disposed of in whatever way necessary. From it mother and son could take as much as they wished for their own needs, to pay for lessons in foreign languages, music, singing, dance, horse-riding, skating, rollerskating, motorcycling, bicycling, motor-boating, flying, automobile driving, and absolutely any fad or whim that his only son could possibly dream of.

Cezary made sure that the "current account" did not molder in the bank. He tried everything that popped into his head. His mother acquiesced to it all, or rather she had to accept whatever he dictated. And so he rode on land and on sea, and even in the air. It could not be said that he did not study at all or even that he studied poorly. For instance, he liked music and played a great deal both during and outside his lessons. He read a multitude of various kinds of books. He graduated from one class to the next, one way or another making up for the lack of systematic and organized studies of the kind

he had pursued while his father was around and he had to put his nose to the grindstone day in, day out and do everything, “to the last accent” as the Russians said.

After a year, and two, and three, it was as if all trace had vanished of his father, who was indeed far away. Baryka was still in the army. He engaged in offensives and took part in defensive maneuvers, but he did not come home. Once he informed them he had been wounded and was in the hospital somewhere far away, on the borders of the Polish heartland. For a long time afterwards he did not write. When a letter finally arrived, it did not come through the army and was written at a different location.

At this time Cezary was growing into an independent and rather willful young pup. His father he had somehow forgotten. The thought of him meant the specter of outworn interdictions, a dark vale exhaling a curiously painful sensation that brought a lump to the throat; above all it was a feeling of sorrow and longing, yet at the same time, in some obscure way it was his own and was natural to him. Cezary did not like to think about his father. Yet there were times when he was seized in mid-stride, as if in an embrace, by a fierce specter, and in the middle of his fun unseen hands held him back. At times something drew him into a vortex of sadness and regret that suddenly opened up beneath his feet. At such moments he had to quell this feeling, which among his friends was known as “spleen,” by exerting himself in a boat or on a bicycle, a motorcycle, or a wild cossack horse. In the course of those long wartime years Cezary’s mother became for him something so pliant,

The Coming Spring

docile, useful, at his service, obedient to every desire and urge, that she was truly like one of his organs, an additional arm or leg. This is not by any means to say that Czarus was a bad son, nor his mother a powerless slouch. But their two organisms had grown together to such an extent, and one belonged so much to the other, that they constituted one mental body. Slowly but surely Cezary was assuming Seweryn's role as the source of decisions, advice, plans, and long-term thinking, and also as the one in command. He did not occupy himself with the home or its affairs, but everything revolved around him. Everyone knew that Mrs. Baryka received and paid the money and carried out instructions, but that handsome Cezary was the one in charge.

In the richly decorated apartment everything remained as it had been at the moment when Seweryn Baryka left. Not one heavy piece of furniture had been repositioned in the living room; not one book had been moved on the desk in the study belonging to the master of the house. Everything was still in its place, as if that very day he had left for his work "at the mines." Here was the newspaper he had been reading the day before his departure; here his fine paper knife lay on the open pages of a book, seemingly still warm from his grip. The apartment, it could be said, was the image of a powerful country within whose borders one takes shelter. Here, as there, everything had been established by mighty labors and long ago brought under control.

Still the head of the household did not come back. In the third year of the war no news came from him for so long that his wife and even his devil-may-care son began

to despair. Information from the military authorities was confusing and unreliable. At one time they were told that Major "Severyan Grigorevich Baryka" had died. Another time it was explained that he had "probably" been taken prisoner by the Germans or the Austrians. In the end, their insistent questions were dismissed coldly, abruptly, and with a certain ironic wink of the official eye: they were informed that he had been swallowed up by the war, and all trace of him had vanished to such an extent that absolutely nothing was known about him. The poor woman's despair surpassed all bounds.

*

But these were not the borders of despair; this was not yet even its realm. The realm of despair advanced, vast and ferocious, improbable and incomprehensible, like an invasion of Tartar horses out of the expanses of Russia and out of time. One day the news spread around the city of Baku at the speed of lightning: revolution! What this word meant in practice, no one was able to clarify, and if one of the wisest had been asked for an explanation he would without doubt have spoken differently from the previous expert, while the next would have had something else again to say. If anyone knew anything concrete about the essence of revolution, it was probably only Cezary Baryka himself, for he was the one who set it in motion. First of all, having heard long ago that there was a revolution somewhere, he stopped attending eighth class. He was joined by the more ardent adherents of his way of thinking and acting. Further-

The Coming Spring

more, he gave up wearing school uniform. Though not entirely—he wore a school cap without its palm-leaf badge to go with his “civilian” jacket. One day the headmaster of the grammar school ran into him in town and asked him with the most innocent of intentions why he was strutting about out of uniform, his cap at a rakish angle and a riding crop or *trostochka* in his hand. By way of reply, with that very *trostochka* Cezary administered two blows that he and his pals had long dreamed of—one to the right ear, one to the left. The crowd that gathered on the street took the side not of the wronged headmaster but of Baryka, the aggressor. Cezary calmly went home, bathed in an aura of glory, and bearing in his hand the henceforward famous *trostochka*. The headmaster called a meeting of the school council, expelled Cezary Baryka from the school and banned him from all other grammar schools in Baku and in the entire country. But this was an utterly harmless act, since Cezary Baryka had no interest in any school in the country. By now other winds were blowing about his ears.

Neither the defendant nor the members of the disciplinary body attached much importance to the verdict. The master who had been beaten filed a lawsuit against his student. But before the time came for the assailant to be brought to justice, mysterious forces smashed the windows of his home every night, leaving not a single one unbroken; smeared birch tar and other foul-smelling sulphurous substances on the door, steps, and walls of his villa; threw dead rats into his study through the holes in the windows; and in front of his house organized caterwauling and other schoolboy antics. The police? In

those days the police had become a curiously sluggish institution. They were quite unable by any means to catch or punish the culprits. It could be said that to their great ignominy they were terrified of them, as in fact was the entire city. Who could say it was not thus that the terrible and all-powerful revolution in the north of the country was manifesting its might? And the police had no wish to get on the wrong side of this driving force.

For quite a long time, in Baku things were quiet, lifeless, and dull. Everything moved and worked as it had before, but did so in an uncommonly drowsy, torpid manner, reservedly, even treacherously. It could not have been otherwise, since everything was changing from day to day. The two major elements in the city—the Tartars and the Armenians—lay in wait for one another with teeth bared and sharpened kinjals concealed about them. The authorities, who had regulated this ancient conflict in the interests of Russian rule, were nowhere to be seen, for something had snapped at the very source of their power and all had been turned upside down. In the end it all scattered every which way. There appeared a revolutionary commissar—strange to relate, a man of Polish background—who rapidly appointed new authorities and introduced a new rule. The Tartars and the Armenians abandoned their struggle and both sides exploited the situation in their own way. First and foremost—all goods disappeared. Stores closed up. There were food shortages. The banks would not issue capital deposited in them and would not give interest. No one was paid their salary. People were evicted from their

The Coming Spring

apartments. The street came to power—workers from the factories and the oil industry, servants from stores and houses, sailors. But things were relatively calm. The city was in effect deprived of government, and drew its strength from the discord between warring tribes. The poorer sections of the populace grew drunk on mass meetings, speeches, and on turning everything topsy-turvy.

Cezary Baryka was of course a regular at the popular rallies. At one of these gatherings they hanged effigies of bourgeois emperors, governors, presidents, generals, and leaders—among others a puppet dressed as Józef Piłsudski.⁷ The crowd applauded in delight, Cezary loudest of all, though truth to tell he had never heard of Józef Piłsudski at this time. He was convinced by everything that the speakers at the meetings said, as if it had come from inside of him, and had been taken from his own mind. That was the very essence of things. He would go home and repeat everything to his mother from A to Z, explaining the more intricate and obscure points. He spoke with the joy and the fury of an explorer who has at last found the right path.

His mother did not attend the rallies. These days she stared dejectedly at the ground and never spoke to anyone about anything. When she was alone with Cezary she tried to argue with him. But he would grow angry and tell her she was incapable of understanding anything, even such simple, clear, and just matters. She was

⁷ Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935), leader of the Polish struggle for national independence and subsequently the country's first president (1918–1922).

simply talking fiddle-faddle. She would say that if someone wanted to create a communist system they ought to take the unused land, whether steppe or mountain, and divide it up equally; then people would combine forces to plough, sow, build, and then reap and gather. To begin everything fairly, for God and for themselves. What kind of communism was it that involved forcing your way into other people's houses, palaces, and churches—places that had been designed for other purposes and couldn't be divided into equal parts. "It's nothing but regular looting," she would say. "It's the easiest thing in the world to turn a palace into a museum. What would be worthy of new people would be for them to create their own museum pieces and put them in a building specially constructed by the forces of communism." She so exasperated her son with the rubbish she talked, and her arguments from the depths of obscurity, or rather from the shabbiest streets of Siedlce, that his hand itched to let her have it for her anti-revolutionary nonsense and to cure her of reactionary views once and for all. He did not spare her any sorts of verbal comments along with matching epithets. His impatience bore him so far that later he regretted certain of his more pointed remarks. When he became particularly angry, she would fall silent and even make approving faces, or actually feign revolutionary enthusiasm.

Young Baryka didn't just attend rallies and demonstrations. In the crowd, amid a tumultuous, stormy, furious crush of people, he sometimes careered to the prisons, where various generals of the White Guard infamous for their cruelty were dragged out of the dungeons and

The Coming Spring

killed. He watched how the sailors and certain civic officials distinguished themselves in this work. He often waited a long time for these vigilante executions, and watched the indescribable madness of the people as the victims were killed slowly, begging for a quicker death. When he returned home from such spectacles and recounted to his mother in detail what had happened and how, his eyes would open wide and his nostrils would flare, and he was breathless and thrilled, smiling a devilish half-smile. At such times she would recoil from him, stare at him with horrified eyes, and mumble her prayers.

One night, when he was fast asleep she went down to the cellar with a dark lantern and dug up a considerable portion of the valuables her husband had buried there. This larger and more precious portion she took out of the city and concealed in the walls of the ancient ruins, in a niche she had previously found for the purpose. This providence of hers—which arose from the blind, coarse, instinctive logic that in times of war and revolution takes control of earthbound, so-called ignorant persons, peasants, petty merchants, small-time industrialists, suburban tradesmen and seasonal laborers—this providence, then, soon bore fruit. A commissarial decree was issued stating that anyone who had buried valuables was to declare them to the authorities upon pain of capital punishment. Cezary came home bringing news of the decree and declaring that he would immediately disclose the hiding place of the family treasure in the cellar. Not out of faint-heartedness but on principle! No more living at the expense of the common people! He

refused to have blood on his hands! His father's gold was burning him!

His mother shook her head. She acquiesced, since this was what he, the head of the household, demanded. Not a word was said any more about his father. Cezary carried out his resolution. Soon there came specialists versed in the art of searching cellars, wily fellows who even without Cezary's "principle" would have found his father's valuables—they would have sniffed out the gold and dug it up even if it had been buried a hundred feet underground, or bricked into the wall. Cezary looked on with pride as Seweryn Baryka's savings were carried away. Yet when he appeared for dinner exhausted and starving, he demanded food and was angry when there was too little. And there was less and less food, and less and less variety—every day it was fish and caviar. No sign any more of bread, meat, vegetables, fruit! Delivery had stopped, and all the stores were closed up. Cezary did not ask where his mother got the money to pay for the fish and the caviar. He missed his bread and fruit, but consoled himself with the certainty that the revolution was experiencing these shortages only temporarily. In the meantime fish and caviar consumed three times a day without any variation began to affect everyone's health.

And what of Baryka's mother! She did not eat; she grew thinner by the day and did not sleep at all. While the young adherent of the revolution now spent entire days away from home observing manifestations of social upheaval, and in fact gathering endless amusing anecdotes, since one group of people was going from draw-

The Coming Spring

ing room to cellar, while another went from cellar to drawing room—during this time his mother was garnering supplies. She would slip out of the city and head far into the hinterland. She made expeditions to the fertile steppe that ran down toward the banks of the River Kura, to Tartar or Georgian farms or German smallholdings. First she would take the train, then from some small stop she would head out on foot. She took with her gold and silver objects, gold imperials and silver roubles, and in exchange for them she would haggle for a few pounds of grain—wheat, rye, finally barley, and even millet. A few times she wheedled and begged and for a huge price she managed to obtain a little flour. She carried it all back, staggering under the burden, miles and miles to the train stop, and in the train she concealed it unceremoniously under her dress. For patrols would pass through the carriages and confiscate this sort of individualistic and bourgeois contraband. Having dragged the grain to the city Mrs. Baryka would take it at night to some Tartars with whom she had long had an understanding. She would have the grain milled, once again for an exorbitant fee in gold and silver. Also at night, she would bake simple biscuits—usually unleavened barley cakes—and bread, so that her only son should be able to taste fresh bread made from flour. Cezary knew little about his mother's trips. For she did not tell him how or from where she had valuables to trade for grain and flour. She knew that in his sacred foolishness he would also immediately have handed over the treasure from the cave. At such times she would tell him that some old Tartar or Armenian she knew had

given her a few handfuls of rye flour for friendship's sake.

But the woman's strength was ebbing. Her legs bent and buckled. Before her eyes there seemed to be a swarm of black bats' wings, and her soul was filled with darkness and fear. Now she was afraid of death. Terribly, oh, terribly afraid! What would happen to the poor boy! He would become an executioner, a cut-throat, a murderer! His soul would plunge into the abyss! He would starve to death here among people who would split their sides laughing at his boyish naivety.

Seweryn Baryka's home was requisitioned. New occupants moved into the drawing room, the study, the bedroom, and the dining room. They sat on the furniture and took possession of everything there was in the apartment. Cezary and his mother now lived in the smallest room; his bed was in the alcove where previously the maid had slept.

When his father's study was taken over, Cezary recalled the instruction—"Guard it with your life!"—written in the small book with the decorative binding that he had often been shown. He wished to find that tome, show whomever he needed to that it was an innocent memento, and keep it for his father if he happened to be alive and should some day return. He searched the entire bookcase, checking every item, but did not find the slender volume about General Dwernicki's campaign against Russia. He concluded that his father must have taken it with him.

The privations to which Cezary Baryka was subject—the half-voluntary and genuinely self-sacrificing re-

The Coming Spring

nouncement of everything, all his delectable games and sports, apartment, food, clothes, money—did in fact have something of a sobering effect upon him. He grew serious and sorrowful. He began to notice objects and occurrences that previously had escaped his attention. Above all, suddenly and with a bizarre feeling of the obvious he perceived his own mother. Out of the blue he was struck by her face, her diffidence, her way of casting furtive glances, her manner, her behavior, her silence. One day he sneaked a closer look at her—and he flinched as if he had been burned by a white-hot iron. He started to observe her comings and goings, follow her steps and investigate what she did—and he shuddered all the more. She was far from old—she had barely turned forty—yet she looked sixty. She had grown hunched, bent, shrunken. She was gray, wrinkled, and sallow; she wore an old, faded and tattered dress. As she bustled about looking after him—taking out his dirty clothes, washing his underwear, seeing to his needs like a maid and a cook—she often clutched at her heart or at her head. He would see her leaning on a knotty stick as she climbed the stairs, or groping at the furniture and walls in the middle of the day, as if she had suddenly gone blind. A searing sense of shame gripped him at the thought of all that this weak, debilitated woman had done for him—how she had cared for him, bursting with health as he was, and he had slept and eaten his fill, rested and digested around her while she rushed about breathless, her nerves ajangle.

Yet he could not change his behavior right away—supposedly because his mother would have noticed at

once—though in fact out of a peculiar sense of shame or some kind of pride. He began imperceptibly, on the sly, as if accidentally, to help her in her work—carrying heavy things, taking out his dirty clothes, washing the floor and the dishes, even doing the laundry, ironing, chopping wood, bringing water and cooking grub. He explained to his mother with his former rudeness that new, communist times had arrived, and everyone had to work. Who does not work, does not eat.⁸ *Plunder what was plundered*⁹—this held only insofar as one worked. Down with white hands! And so on.

In the end Cezary finally discovered his mother's scrupulously concealed secret—her expeditions out of the city for grain. At that point he was overcome by a colossal sense of remorse. He wept profoundly as he thought of her running across unfamiliar fields, dragging or carrying grain for him, staggering on frail legs amid the furrows, and gasping for the air her lungs lacked more and more. He began to watch over her sleeplessness in the night. He would get up and cover her as she lay, small and thin beneath the quilt, as if she were not there at all; he would put his arms around her, soothe her, and calm her. It sometimes happened that she would fall asleep with a soft smile, and with joy in her heart at his sweet words and unobtrusive caresses.

At this time the two of them clung to each other morally and supported one another in spirit. Cezary noticed that his mother, who could “never understand

⁸ A Bolshevik slogan.

⁹ An anarchist slogan.

The Coming Spring

the simplest thing," was after all not as unintelligent as it had previously seemed to him. Some developments she foresaw with infallible clarity, and she assessed certain events with mathematical precision. Here there sounded particular watchwords, iron directives were issued, splendid and noble-sounding injunctions were announced—yet she saw that the consequences would be absolutely the reverse, the laughable, diametrical opposite. And then, in contradiction to the logic of things, in contradiction to the power and direction of the intention, things would go exactly the way she had predicted with her murmured doubts. Cezary found these coincidences striking, but they were not enough to turn him from the path he had chosen.

Whenever a passenger ship arrived from Astrakhan, Cezary's mother would always know of it in advance and the two of them would go down to the port and wait—for nothing in particular. In fact they did know what for, but they never spoke of it. They did not want to admit it to themselves and they were fearful of jinxing things. They were waiting for Cezary's father. Now Cezary was no longer afraid of his return, for it was too late. He had already lost all hope when he had been informed by the authorities that his father had perished in the war. He had not revealed this to his mother, for he could not bring himself to administer such a blow to her exhausted heart. Besides—he had his doubts. How many times had men come back after they had been declared killed!

At these times they would always stand in the port and wait for a tiny indistinct dot to appear out of the

dull blue mist-covered emptiness of the sea. Cezary's mother's face would stiffen; her eyes glazed over, her lips trembled, and her hands would crumple a tear-soaked handkerchief. Secret, wordless prayers passed through her ruined body—prayers from over there, from Podlasie, nurtured amid religious persecution, and brought to this remote shore, to such different circumstances.... She would writhe inwardly, twisting in the torment of doubt and the living torture of hope; she would stumble as she bore her cross, lying at God's door and beseeching Him that the ship looming out of the dark distance beyond the Apsheron peninsula—that it should bring Seweryn with it. Out of the sea and out of the Russian land a hundred times vaster than the sea, out of the ghastly times of war and revolution, out of conflagrations and the madness of human collectives—was it possible there should come the man she longed for, he, the one and only, who had brought her to these shores and had abandoned her? Through a veil of tears she would gaze at the ship, as if it were a vision of the angel of the Lord coursing between land and sea and bringing happiness or misery. Her heart would hammer in her breast like a bell in an empty tower while the ship approached, entered the harbor, and moored at the quayside.... As the passengers began to disembark she looked avidly at every face and every figure. She measured every person and rejected each one with a flustered and frightened curse.

“He's not there!”—as they crowded off the ship.

“He's not there!”—as they jostled over the gangway.

The Coming Spring

“He’s not there!”—as they poured out onto the stone flags of the quay.

And when the very last passenger had emerged and none but the sailors remained on board, she had to hold herself back by force so as not to fling herself upon the boulders of the port, so as not to howl and tear out her hair. Yet her grown son stood next to her. He too was peering at the new arrivals. He too was penetrating the throng with his gaze and gazing intently at the horde on the gangway the moment it began to pour from the innards of the vessel. He too was waiting. At times fearful Muscovite imprecations tumbled from his lips. He would mock the newcomers. He would point them out to his mother with hatred, that new, fashionable hatred which had never before been in his heart. He would say that they are the excrement of Russia. He would say that the open maw of the ship was like the rectum of the great empire. Fugitives! Refugees! The bourgeoisie! They were doing a bunk from their homeland. They were scarpering—the officials, dignitaries, masters, the greater and lesser magnates, merchants, industrialists, peasants and priests and officers. The recent rulers, *chinodrals* and *stupaykas*,¹⁰ all kinds of ignorant characters clad in the most eccentric manner, or in what was left of their uniforms. One or another still wore a military star or had a “cockade” on his cap. Gentlemen in coarse woolen overcoats, magnates in peasant shirts, all mumbling to one another in French. They bore sacks on their backs;

¹⁰ Pen-pushers and lowly clerks (Russ., contemptuous).

luggage was strewn around their feet, and they could barely carry all their belongings and effects. They were skedaddling from their homeland and heading for Asia Minor, Constantinople, or “wherever,” so long as it was somewhere else in the world. They had been willing to conquer the whole world, to appropriate it and absorb it; now the world was absorbing them. They were setting off to conquer the world in panic, in anxiety, in a great fear that was driving them from the realms where they had held power. They had been thoroughly sifted and macerated by the teeth of the revolution and the machinery of the communist government’s torture chambers. Now they were taking to their heels. They were happy to wear rags and carry a walking stick so long as they could get as far as possible from those boundless places over which they had held sway with their written law and their cossack lash.

One day, while they were waiting as usual and as the ship was emptying to the last person—and they waited the way they always did, in vain—they noticed a group of beggarly women who had emerged from the vessel and were squatting on the dockside, their bundles and packages gathered around them. It was a family comprising four daughters and a mother, an older woman. The girls looked unfed and exhausted; they were so tattered that even their footwear consisted of boards strapped to their feet with string. Their rags hung from them in strips, and bare flesh could be seen through the holes. Yet these persons had not been born into penury. They had fine, regular features, and the mother’s countenance betrayed a certain elegance and

The Coming Spring

refined quality despite her threadbare clothes. Even the suffering in that face was different, as if well brought up and aristocratic. Cezary's mother, out of her own inborn disposition to compassion, went up to these women and began talking with them. Cezary, who could not tolerate such sensitivities, went his own way. At this point his mother grew more confident as she got to know the new arrivals. It turned out that this was Duchess Shcherbatov-Mamaev and her children, fleeing the country. Their property, which had included vast tracts of land, woodland, factories, mansions, and villas, had all been confiscated, while they themselves had been sent from one prison to another, suffering from sickness, smallpox, filth, vermin, and utter destitution, till they had finally broken away and were escaping in whatever direction they could.

Mrs. Baryka was moved to pity; she invited them to come to her room and arranged bedding for them as best she was able in such a small space. When the young ladies had fallen asleep on their shared pallet spread out on the floor, in the kitchen Duchess Shcherbatov-Mamaev unburdened herself to the hospitable and compassionate Polish woman. It transpired that on both of her emaciated calves, from the knee to the ankle, she carried bracelets that were priceless not only because of the value of the precious stones they contained, but also because of their historical significance as heirlooms. These golden fetters tormented her fearfully because, half-open, they dug into her body with their clasps and gnawed bloody indentations in her flesh. The two of them removed the bracelets from the duchess's smarting

legs; in the freight cars they had traveled in and then subsequently on the ship, she had not taken them off for weeks, fearing she would be searched and the bracelets would be confiscated. They put them on the stove and for the first time in a long, long while the duchess fell asleep.

As ill luck would have it, that very night the apartment was searched. The valuables were found and taken, and Cezary and his mother bore the price for concealing such an amount of gold and precious stones. Both were blacklisted. It was only the good reputation that "comrade Baryka" enjoyed among the Bolshevik authorities that helped to reduce the penalty. The emigrant women, who of course had been followed, once again found themselves securely behind bars.

*

The hospitality she had extended to Duchess Shcherbatov-Mamaev did not make things any easier for Cezary's mother. From that moment she was evidently watched closely, for she was arrested at the very moment when she meant to take something from the valuables concealed on the heights above the city—with the intention of making another trip into the country for grain. Beaten severely about the face, she admitted to possessing valuables and revealed the hiding place where they were to be found. Yet this did not save her. She was sent to do hard labor in the port. But she did not toil there long. The work constituted an excellent course of treatment leading from this world to the next. Cezary

The Coming Spring

pleaded and managed to have his mother placed for a time in a general hospital. But after she had rested she had to return to the hard labor. Her weak and exhausted organism was not up to it; jostled by one of the guards, she fell by the roadside and died. Her body was to be buried in a common grave for counter-revolutionaries, but here too her son's pleas brought a concession. The "bourgeois woman" was buried separately, in the Catholic cemetery. The Georgian priest led the requisite prayers for her, uttering the old Latin words that were tethered to her childlike faith, to the joy of her youth and the great sorrows of her life.

But before the simple coffin was lowered into the ground, Cezary had a wish to see his mother one more time. He tore off the board covering the sprucewood box and took a last look at the face of the expired woman. As he laced her stiffened fingers for her eternal rest he noticed that the gold wedding band which for so many years he had been accustomed to kissing, thinking of it as virtually a part of her like a bone or a joint, grown into the skin of the slim hand—he saw that the ring had been torn from her finger along with the dead skin, for she had evidently refused to part with it voluntarily. The discolored, clotted wound could be seen in the place where the ring had once been. Cezary remembered that sight. No one was able to tell him who had taken his mother's wedding ring. To the question of whether it had been confiscated, official shoulders were shrugged, and the reply came from lips twisted into an indulgent, half-ironic, forbearing smile. It was only now that he knew for whom he had kept

that dagger in the Caucasian cave back in his distant youth.

*

And so it was that Cezary Baryka was left alone in the world. He no longer had a mother; he had no father; and he had nothing of his former wealth. Even his room in their former apartment was taken away from him, and he was given a new one, far away in the black town amid the "mines." After his mother's death he ceased entirely to think about his father. When he sought once again to obtain information, the news he was given was dire. According to this most recent report Seweryn Baryka, a major in the tsar's army, had long ago gone over to the side of the enemy; he had betrayed his colors and joined the Polish legions.¹¹ But, it was added, there too, in those legions, he was nowhere to be found among the intelligence that the agencies possessed. There too he had vanished without a trace. "*Pogib!*—He's dead!" they finally pronounced, with concealed satisfaction.

This was a definitive, irrevocable formulation.

Cezary was caught in the clutches of loneliness. While his mother was alive he had never known this condition. This grown young man, while he had often sulked in a purely personal way, had nevertheless always been led by the hand. It was only now that he grew numb, no longer

¹¹ Polish forces organized by Józef Piłsudski as part of the campaign for Polish independence. The Polish legions fought in the Austrian army in the First World War.

The Coming Spring

finding his mother's small, frail, bony hand in the emptiness. He was supercilious toward himself, explaining to his own emotions that it was the most natural thing in the world for an old, sick, nervous wreck of a woman to pass away, especially in circumstances so deleterious for her health. But grief—a condition like an overwhelming fever that smites the living organism—would not yield to his reasoning, and did not give in to it. His legs of their own accord bore him to the cemetery, to that fresh pile of soil impregnated with natural vapors, where the sentient essence of his mother lay buried. He would sit there and stare at the earth.

It was only now that he could clearly see how this feeble woman had remained herself, how she had moved deliberately toward her own goal, and how she had infallibly foreseen everything that lay in the way. She alone had not been taken aback by events. She seized them immediately in her hands, in the perfect and conscious knowledge of how as a mother she had to act at any given moment. Gazing now through the pile of red Baku soil at his mother's life, Cezary could see that she was not feeble at all, but on the contrary strong. She had been oppressed, set upon, pummeled by ailments depriving her of all her strength—insomnia, anemia, and finally poverty and hunger; and all took their toll on her. And yet she had never surrendered to anything even for a moment; she had never stopped; she had never retreated; she had never fallen silent. It was only base, bestial human violence and physical, invincible death that had broken her iron will. Now it was that his offenses against her came to light—his disobedience, his rude-

ness, his oafish hostility, his shabby mistreatment of that priceless vessel of the soul. But his unmanly tears, wrung out by his contrition, became the wellspring of his exculpation. They found one another anew, mother and son. Hand in hand they entered the distant woods on the southern slopes of the foothills, or the coastal groves of Zykx silvered by the caress of a spring breeze. Cezary was and was not alone. He would gaze at a graceful little peach tree whose bright pinkness stood out conspicuously against the background of a stone enclosure tended by a hard-working Tartar, in that terrible treeless land; and he would whisper to his mother: "Look, a little peach tree all alone!" He would pick the earliest spring anemones and render their scentless cups, open toward the sky, into a non-existent palm. He would place the flowers in the cold air, and when they fell to the ground he dreamed that hands forever inclined to caresses pressed them to smiling lips; and he felt upon himself ties that could not be broken, and that held him with the same power.

He passed long hours staring out at the sea, which was eternally the same and forever changing; the cliffs of the bare hills dropped precipitously toward it, while over it hung clumps of jagged southern pines. When the grass surrounding the steep gardens of the peninsula's beautiful bay turned a rich and lustrous green, and among it thousands of violets and pasqueflowers opened their lively eyes and showed their tiny faces, he recalled the writings of the poets that he had been made to learn by heart in various languages and that previously he had disdained. As the flowers poured forth their

The Coming Spring

scent, perpetually stirring the emotions, he arrived at the conviction that on earth there are only two things that are immortal and not subject to the corruption of death: the eternal return of flowers in springtime, and the recreation of their return to earth in poetry. At such times he would recite to his dead mother those words, quiet, fragrant as violets, of no use to anyone, familiar and alien simultaneously, which previously he had not understood and had failed to value. With these words, he sent her a message into the cold depths of her grave that spring had come again—that the oriole, the golden-feathered bird they had so loved to show one another during the happy days of the past, and whose song they loved to listen to on spring mornings, had appeared again from goodness knows where; and out of the branches of a lone cedar, in its incomprehensible tongue it was proclaiming to heaven, sea, and earth the returning good fortune of the coming spring.

Now—too late!—Cezary obeyed his mother. He slipped under her arm just as when he was tiny and helpless. He strove to grasp all of her thoughts, to understand them, to absorb them in their entirety. And he was greatly relieved in his suffering when he drew her into himself in this way. All of her! With the whole stock of her ideas and feelings, with all the offshoots, branchings and connections of her nature. With all her failings! He now understood the number and kind of her failings. He forgave them all and set them free. For instance, she had had mistaken notions about the affairs of this world. He could plainly see the pathways of her reasoning. Even where in essence she had been exceedingly

wise, infallible, and utterly far-sighted, he perceived her error and absolved it with all his heart. Unable to persuade her in her lifetime, he tried to convince her soul. In return he opened up his own soul to hers. He taught it the secret of his spiritual essence. At a place far away on a barren hillside covered with crooked, misshapen bushes, he held long conversations with his mother. He explained to her the mystery that he himself, Cezary, was not her, his mother. He was something other, something different, apart, new, hard, rough, restless, and susceptible to storms and confusion—something young, not old like her. In his young male heart there burned a different flame than in her old, maternal, feminine heart. With love and respect he explained to her that because of her sex and her love, the weakness of love, she was incapable of understanding the immensity of the upheaval the revolution entailed. He absorbed that immensity the way a sponge absorbs the waters of the ocean, while she, his mother, was incapable of drawing any of it out for herself because, as a mother, she loved and cared too much. And now that the abject, earthly, feeble, womanly trembling of the heart, and the powerlessness, and concern for her son, had gone out of her—now that her body was no longer overwhelmed by a sleepless watch-keeping—now that she was nothing but pure and free spirit—she should look into his heart, she should enter his young male heart. At one time she had permeated all the needs of his infant organism and penetrated into the very core of his being. Let the same happen now!

“Revolution,” he elucidated to his mother’s soul, “is a necessity that predominates over everything else. It’s

The Coming Spring

a moral law. For dozens of centuries the wretched have been downtrodden, oppressed, and deprived of rights by the privileged. As a consequence of the brutal law that allowed the privileged to rule over those deprived of rights, how many died of sickness, poverty, of the torments of forced indigence, in agony, under the yoke of service! Even with the sharpest imagination it's impossible to count the vast numbers of beings murdered, spiritual riches laid waste, and beauty for ever destroyed. There's a whole continent of people buried alive, a huge, boundless cemetery in which every clod of earth cries for vengeance upon Cain. If those clods of lifeless earth could speak or could find some way of conveying comprehensible signs, every stone of the Orthodox and Catholic churches would groan, every brick of the palaces, every column of every room would be dripping with blood, and the streets would be dewed with tears. For everywhere there was terrible violence, under the yoke, beneath the lash and in subjugation, and people had to work not for themselves but for someone else. Our money, our costly and comfortable furniture, our expensive plates and the fine meals served upon them were seasoned and thoroughly saturated with wrongs done to others. Oh, mother! I don't wish any longer to drink expensive wines, for they're mixed with the sweat of the tormented. I have no wish to tread on soft carpets, because my feet would be walking over the coughing breasts of consumptives. I have no wish to wear luxurious clothing, since it would burn me like Hercules' tunic soaked in blood from the mortal wounds of the centaur Nessus.

Such a lion's leap had to be made one day for violence to be thrust from the throne of power by the violence of our hand. How fortunate we are that it happened in our times, that it was achieved before our eyes! We looked on at the birth of momentous history. Finally, down with injustice! Down with violence of man against man! Your son will not stand in the ranks of the oppressors. I refuse! I will not! I will not! I will not!"

The branches swayed gently in the warmth of the sun. Amid the tiny leaves there was a murmur as if of a sigh. In the wind from the south there seemed to come a whisper, familiar from his childhood, and to which his ear had become accustomed:

"That's right, that's right, my little one! If you say it's so, it must be so..."

*

Life became very different for the residents of the city of Baku, the peninsula, and the entire Caucasian region when in March 1918 one part of its population—to wit, the Armenians under the generalship of Shaumian—summoned four Armenian-Georgian regiments whose withdrawal from the Eastern front had been instigated by order of the Russian revolutionary government, and furthermore persuaded the commander of the English forces to use his artillery, infantry, and cavalry—two thousand men in all—to occupy the center of the extensive territory of the city. As a consequence of this turn of events the other group of

The Coming Spring

inhabitants—the Tartars—went to ground in terror, mindful of their responsibility for the terrible massacre of 1905 visited upon the Armenian populace.¹²

The Tartars' fears were not misplaced. The Armenians burned mosques along with the women and children who had taken refuge inside them, and from March to September they were the masters of life and death, or rather the deliverers of death alone for the Tartars. The latter population of the city of Baku and its environs had no recourse but to seek help from the outside. And they could not find it anywhere but on the Bosphorus, at the feet of the Caliph, the representative of the prophet and the natural avenger of the mosques that had been desecrated and burned. The Caliph inclined his ear to the request of the Tartar and Turkmen faithful with their tale of the wrongs done to them. Under the command of Nuri Pasha, a sizeable Turkish army said to have comprised three divisions was dispatched to take command of the region; it crossed the Kura, exterminating the residents of Armenian villages, and hauling its cannon across the mountain torrents on bridges made of dead bodies.

Baku found itself in dire circumstances. Defended by the English artillery, which had been skillfully placed in effective positions on the hills, and by the Armenian regiments, which now had nothing to lose since even the Georgians had left for home, the city came under fire from the Turkish guns. According to an agreement

¹² It is important to point out that Żeromski's historical account is not entirely accurate.

reached between the Armenian commander Shaumian and the English, the city was to raise something along the lines of an army or popular movement to the tune of at least sixty thousand men. Anyone in the city or region who wore pants, from callow youths to doddering elders, was rounded up and taken to the trenches. Nevertheless, no more than thirty or forty thousand men were found, moreover untrained and unfit for war. In addition, there was nothing to feed this Armenian army made up of all kinds of elements to be found round the oil fields of the region. The Turkish shelling brought down not only the houses of the rich Armenian capitalists and industrialists, but also the frail cottages of the Tartars. The streets were strewn with rubble. None of the inhabitants ventured above ground, but rather took shelter in the cellars. The oil-black city became black twice over from smoke and the dust-storm of war.

During the bombardment of Baku Cezary Baryka's living conditions were truly lamentable. After the breakdown of the initial revolution he had been thrown out of the room that had been assigned to him. The building where his parents' apartment had been was destroyed by Turkish shells. But in its cellar, which had once contained his parents' valuables, Cezary found a refuge for himself and few of his comrades. He experienced hunger. He went about half-naked, filthy, with matted hair, knowing neither the day not the hour when an unexpected projectile would find him. From morning to night, and in the night too, he watched for a way of obtaining something to eat, in a manner that had little in

The Coming Spring

common with the usual forms of purchase or of socially accepted modes of exchange.

He witnessed extraordinary things, for the Tartars and the Armenians were not idle during this time; they were at each others' throats and killed one another whenever the opportunity presented itself. It was demonstrated that not only revolutionaries but all others too have a talent for slaughter. Cezary did not know who in fact he was, nor where his place lay in this conflict. He could take the side neither of the Armenians nor the Tartars, nor the Turks, nor the English, nor the Russians, who had once ruled here, and then had overthrown their own rule and brought the watchwords of revolution. Yet the revolution had collapsed and was never mentioned in the exchange of fire between the two raging sides. The only true and unchanging reality, as innumerable centuries before, was once again gas, the burning hydrocarbon for the seizing of which, long ago, Prometheus had been punished by being bound to the cliffs of the Caucasus. No longer with his former contempt, Cezary Baryka now thought of the temple of fire between the oil fields of Barakhan and Surakhan,¹³ where once the disciples of Zoroaster had worshipped this eternal destructive force. For it had been nothing else but that mysterious accumulation of rock oil in the innards of the earth which had brought together in this place so many different nations and now had set them at odds. Who should be accorded priority,

¹³ Properly Balakhany and Surakhany, towns in the oil-producing region of Azerbaijan; in the latter there was an ancient temple of fire-worshippers.

or at the very least legitimacy, in the race for this most abundant and self-generating of springs? Truly, such a privilege belonged to no one.

And thus Baryka felt especially lonely, lonely unto death. Death for him became a matter of indifference, almost something to be desired. The loathsome Nord wind blowing from the mountains of the Caucasus, the artillery shells crashing from the south, the smoke of the burning oilfields, the omnipresent stench of corpses, the hunger, thirst, lice, the filth and wretchedness of the place where he slept, which previously he would not have given even to a yard dog—none of these things was as vexatious as his inner emptiness and his inability to find anything to attach himself to. Life lived from day to day, half as a thief, a life whose only purpose was to obtain at any price the vilest food under the sun—this he had had enough of and was sickened by. And so Baryka often went traipsing about in the most dangerous open places, scorning the threat of death. Tedium lay everywhere in that treeless, flowerless, gas-filled anthill presently being smashed by huge artillery shells. When the day began with people greeting one another with a clatter of shots that soon turned into a dialogue between cannon, it was clear that on such a day nothing would occur but idleness extending for many long hours. When night fell, perpetual hunger incited one to crime. Models of crime were all about, constantly and at every step. Models that were monstrous and so ingenious that nothing could surprise the observer any more. The murder of women and children in broad daylight amid unruffled onlookers, brutal shootings, the abuse of the dying, tor-

The Coming Spring

ture artfully designed so the perpetrators would be sated and properly entertained by the sight of suffering—all this was already familiar to Cezary. Often, in his numbness and his half-animal impassivity, when he was capable of nothing but base derision, mocking the helplessness and comicality of the victims and closely following the details of the torture, he was all at once seized by an awareness of his orphaned soul. At such times he would pull his rags about him and with the rapid step of a timorous outcast would betake himself to his mother's grave. He would squat there, drowsy in spirit, curled up and listening to the cannon fire.

Yet the truly terrible events were still to come. The young fellow was spotted during his peregrinations; he was conscripted into the army and sent to the trenches. His half-naked body was clothed in some garment or other; he was given some unwieldy, ancient rifle that probably recalled the days of Pushkin's *Prisoner of the Caucasus*,¹⁴ and was told to shoot into open space. He fired his gun obstinately. This lasted till September 1918. At that time the roar of the artillery intensified and reached its apogee. Among the multilingual and largely unmilitary crowd of defenders of the fortified positions, there began a hullabaloo of the kind popular at that time in Russia: there was a council. The welcome phrase rang out: "Let's go home." The "Armenian army" withdrew from the trenches, hastened toward the ships at anchor in the port and at least half their number sailed away

¹⁴ A long poem by Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837) from 1822, set in the Caucasus mountains.

across the sea, to the land of the Sarthians¹⁵ on the far side of the Caspian.

Since Cezary had no “home” to which he could withdraw himself from the front, had little interest in traveling overseas, and attached no especial value to life, he simply returned to his family cellar. The antiquated rifle he left in a ditch, its bayonet stuck into the ground as was the fashion, and he methodically unpicked the insignia that at some point had been sewn onto his right shoulder. Without any special effort the Turkish army “took” the positions on the Baku hills and entered the city. The Albanian lions¹⁶ and the infantry of the Dardanelles that had so harried the English upon the ruins of ancient Troy, here truly had little opportunity to show their mettle. The English, who defended the center of the city with a stalwart and desperate courage, found themselves encircled by a superior force. Eight hundred of them managed to sail away, while eight hundred more remained. It was to no avail that they lay down their arms and held up their hands—those eight hundred men were bayoneted to death. After which there began the true hell in that smoking vale. In the course of four days the Tartars took their revenge, slaughtering over seventy thousand Armenians, Russians, and anyone else who found

¹⁵ I hypothesize that this is an error for “Parthians,” ancient occupants of present-day Turkmenistan on the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea.

¹⁶ Žeromski is referring to the famous Albanian regiments in the Turkish army. However, Albania had won its independence in 1912 and such regiments no longer fought for the Turks in 1918.

The Coming Spring

themselves abroad and was suspected of sympathizing with the Armenian side.

Cezary Baryka survived thanks to an identity card he had received by chance from the consul of some "Polish State," and to which he himself had attached no importance whatsoever. He showed the card at a venture when the Turkish troops leading the Tartar crowd burst into the cellar. And—wonder of wonders!—this document, proclaiming him to be a citizen of some "Lechistan," some yet-to-be Poland, some myth, a ridiculous idea—ridiculous to Baryka himself—saved his life. He was clapped on the shoulder, but was not allowed to go his own way. He had to follow the Turkish *askers*, the soldiers. He did so gladly.

The streets he knew so well presented a sorry spectacle. Without exaggeration and without speaking figuratively, the case was that blood was not flowing in the gutters but rather pouring over the ground like a branching river. It flowed into the sea, coloring the clear waves. The bodies of murdered Armenians were brought to the shore in trucks and carts and thrown into the water. Fish from distant regions of the Caspian arrived in large shoals when they learned of the abundant fodder. But they were unable to swallow and digest it all. Moreover, the sea refused to receive and keep possession of these human victims. It cast them back, dried and bloody, by the labor of the clear waves. There arose the need to bury these dried bodies in order to avoid infection, given the speed at which they decomposed in the southern heat. Along with other vagrants who had somehow managed to cock a snook

Houses of Glass

at death, Cezary Baryka was pressed into service burying the corpses in the earth.

*

The huge *arba* or two-wheeled goods cart, its canvas awning removed for the present job, and pulled by two oxen, was moving uphill ever so slowly behind at least a hundred others, far beyond the outskirts of Baku. The road switchbacked up the hill; it was bordered by steep-sided ditches filled with mounds of dirt. The north wind blew keenly down from the mountains, flinging dust into the eyes of the oxen and the living humans. The *arbas* were filled to the very top of their wooden sides with the bodies of the killed. From each of the carts ascending slowly toward the coastal hills there dripped a ruddy gore that left a colored trail down the middle of the parched roadway. Alongside the wagons, here and there a Turkish soldier trailed along with his gun over his shoulder, keeping order in this vast funeral for tens of thousands of deceased.

Cezary Baryka was walking beside his cart and urging on the straining oxen with a leather whip. For many days now he had been forced to play the role of hearse driver and gravedigger. He had grown used to his occupation, and had even become accustomed to the revolting smell of decomposing bodies. He set his nose to the wind blowing from the open mountain wildernesses and performed his duties indifferently, thinking of things and matters more cheerful than what he saw before him. Above all, what was more cheerful was the thought of

The Coming Spring

food, which was provided by the victors in portions that were niggardly but dependable and regular. Of late, during the days of hunger and in the "war," Cezary Baryka had lost a great deal of weight and was in a weakened state. He experienced moments of faintness when he was fit to drop, and so now he ate the gruel he was apportioned with indescribable relish. And as he consumed this mush with regularity, his thoughts too moved more nimbly through his head, and his eyes saw more extensively than before. The bodies that his *arba* gathered on the streets and squares of the city, and which the lovers of life who had been dragooned into this work tossed into the lofty innards of the cart with iron pitchforks as if they were straw mixed with mud or smoldering fertilizer—these bodies lay as it were outside his line of sight. For who among the living would be able or willing to gaze on the revolting, pitiful, bloody torsos and shattered heads?

And yet on the day in question the young ox-driver did look at one of them. From the depths of the wagon, as if from the unrestrained press of male bodies, there emerged the cadaver of a young woman. Thrown on her back, she hung over the left wheel. It seemed as if, just as in life, she was breaking free in her girlish way from the closeness of alien bodies and corporeal embraces. Her black hair reached down to the ground and trailed in the bloody dust of the road. Her right hand, inert and stiff, dropped onto the wheel and was caught among the spokes. The young wagon-driver's gaze repeatedly and insistently returned to her, until in the end he became aware of the extraordinary beauty of the dead girl's face,

which quite electrified him. Her body, her cheeks, chin, mouth, and ears were a miracle of harmony. Her dark eyes, enwrapped in a night even darker and more impenetrable than themselves, were open, and her unseeing, inverted pupils stared implacably at the driver. Her tiny mouth was open too, and the motionless tongue within had become the frozen image of a terrifying cry that continued to issue from it, though it could no longer be heard. Her small, sculpted, aquiline Armenian nose was now taut like a string stretched beyond all measure. Her bare neck and small, naked, virginal breasts held the same accursed cry, which was a thousand times more piercing than a roll of thunder accompanying lightning. Cezary fixed his eyes on this figure departing for the other world and heard within himself the cry she was uttering. Her pale arm with its darker coloring, a harmonious, perfect masterpiece of beauty which, it seemed, because of the sublime forms of the shoulder, the roundnesses and hollows of the elbow, and the narrowing of its shape toward the hand, could never perish and ought to last for eternity—all this called out for vengeance. The livid fingers were bent in gentle but stubborn resistance, the fingernails dancing as they were struck repeatedly by the spokes of the wheel. It seemed that the dead girl was plucking the spokes as if they were the strings of some unimaginable musical instrument. Cezary heard within himself the inner music that the lifeless hand brought forth from the turning wheel of death. He understood this music through the special, extraordinary power that early youth alone cultivates in the human breast.

The Coming Spring

“What were your eyes looking at, young martyr, when your lips were forced to issue the cry of death?” he asked the dead girl.

“Where are you leading me, driver?” the virginal fingers asked him in turn as they played. “Have you no pity for me, you wretched, soulless warrior? Will you not avenge me, you shameless lackey? You miserable coward, afraid of another man stronger than you! Your heart trembles like the heart of a dog made fearful by the sight of its master’s wrath! Look upon my misfortune, you hireling, and go on diligently performing your trade!”

Cezary Baryka gazed at the dead girl and heard her calling. Contemplating her exquisite body, her delightfully arched eyebrows, and her stern mouth, he listened to her declaration, which may have been clearer even than if she had spoken in human language:

“I grew up in the lap of love at my mother’s side, like a rose on its stem. All in me was beauty and fragrance. All I encountered was happiness. Of happiness and beauty were my days woven. Within me all was health and strength. I was healthy, filled with fragrance and happiness for all those about me, like the springtime flower of the rose. All my health waited for the inner happiness I had not yet known. Why did you murder me, you despicable men?”

“I do not know,” moaned the driver. “I was taught the names of the tyrants of the past, who were said to have disgraced human nature by their acts, and in whose footsteps the grass would not grow. Yet was there ever a generation more despicable than mine and yours, young

Houses of Glass

martyr? Were seventy thousand ever put to death in the space of four days? Has the earth ever seen such mounds of the slaughtered?"

"Do not forget the wrong done to me, young driver! Observe closely the crimes of humankind! Be on your guard! Remember!"

*

The defensive earthworks used formerly by the English army and the Armenian regiments and subsequently by the Turkish forces were situated along the tops of foothills that extended further than the immense cemetery of the murdered Armenians. The idea was that the Nord wind should not carry the stench of such a huge number of corpses to the military entrenchments. When all the bodies had been removed from the city and laid side by side in long, deep pits, they were laboriously covered with earth, forming an elongated mound that ran in a semi-circle as it followed the line of the hillside. The work of shoveling the earth over the bodies required many human hands. And since it needed to be completed as quickly as possible, it was carried out with great severity in a truly eastern manner. The soldiers themselves remained in shelters built beyond the earthworks in the manner of casemates, though they were constructed hastily and carelessly. The second, inner mound, the mass grave, was lower than the outer fortifications. The laborers who were engaged day and night in the task of moving earth to fill the trench of corpses were temporarily housed in a part of the military installations

The Coming Spring

that dated from even before the Armenians and was built of boards and scrap wood brought there from the black town.

Among the other workers, Cezary Baryka also stayed there. He slept with others on a large bunk lying side by side. And thus one group of this human flock slept in rows in the earth, while another row, of the living, slept a little ways above the first; and a third row, higher still, also slept above the others, also side by side, and made sure that the other two rows did what they were supposed to. The victuals in the workers' barracks grew worse and worse as the task of filling in the trench progressed and moved towards its conclusion. The less dangerous the dead beneath their thick layer of earth became for the victors, the less food was given to the living laborers. During this hard physical work, to which Cezary was not accustomed, he once again grew thin, pale, and weak. He worked more with his nerves than with his muscles. After a long and exhausting working day he found it hard to get to sleep. Often the hot, sultry night would be coming to an end before he was able to doze off. And the dawn had barely whitened the distant strip of sea when there were shouts to get up, and those still sleeping were given a kick. In such conditions the future of a spoiled mommy's boy did not augur well. Half-naked, barefoot, shirtless and capless, thoroughly infested with vermin, unshaven and filthy—he gradually forgot about his previous life. He became rooted body and soul in the red soil of Baku that he dug from morning till night. His inner sadness slowly turned into a barren cynicism

and a base indolence. After all, it was not always beautiful Armenian girls that he buried. Predominantly those he returned to mother earth for safekeeping were pot-bellied, dissolute arrivistes, merchants, and accountants, and he had grown thoroughly disgusted by the sight and the smell of them.

Often in the night he would slip out of the shack, which stank of living candidates for corpses just as much as the actual stiff, and pass the time staring mindlessly into the distance. He was searching for his own soul, and gathering its scattered fragments. It was only the physical fear of how he would survive the following day without sleep that drove him back to his bunk amid his snoring, stinking fellow-laborers. Most of the time people did not know what sort of an individual he was. Since the workers were Russians, Georgians, Germans, and Jews, and he was a little different from all of them, he was excluded from the groups that spoke among themselves predominantly in Russian—he was left out, and even as it were blacklisted. The name Baryka and the contemptuous term for his nationality, Polak, were rolled into one and became a nickname—Barolak—which did not exactly denote a friendly attitude. The nickname alone was enough for Cezary to keep his distance from the other workers.

Along with the laborers engaged in back-breaking toil from morning to night on that cadaver-strewn hill, there was also a third category of living beings to be found hanging about: beggars, starvelings, sickly cripples, old men and woman—in a word, the dregs of the city and the port, drawn to the army by the possibility of food.

The Coming Spring

The Turkish soldiers would throw this rabble unfinished bones and any surplus bread, vegetables, or fruit. In the city of Baku this was the only place where such people could seize hold of something to eat in their stiffened or trembling fingers. All earnings had come to an end; no one sullied themselves with work, all the stores were closed, life itself had subsided, and a monstrous hunger stalked the silent, deserted streets. This mob of the hungry and thirsty thronged the roads and ditches with their moaning and their groaning; they watched out for Turkish scraps and licked their lips as soon as smoke began to rise from the chimneys of the army kitchens. These feckless hangers-on even tried to beg or steal from the workers in the boneyard, who were themselves so poorly fed. They crept right up to the spades, squatting down as close as they could, lying in wait and lurking everywhere without so much as a by your leave. Among them there was no lack of the mad or half-mad, holy fools, hysterics, and those who had only just gone insane, unable to recover from the dreadful torments of body and soul during the siege, the bombing, and the massacre. And who could have also unmasked all the scoundrels, con-men and good-for-nothings who also loitered there on the lookout for something of interest, despite the fact that any temptation to steal was punishable by a bullet in the back of the head.

In the course of these days, among the crowd of wretches and reprobates Cezary noticed a certain creature who kept skulking about in his vicinity. It was a Russian peasant, with a beard and shaggy hair, wearing an indescribably filthy *rubashka* or country shirt, a peas-

ant jacket hanging by its last threads, peaked cap, coarse pants and bast shoes. This fellow would appear first thing in the morning and doze on a pile of rocks removed when the pit was being dug. His back was bent; his head was always lowered and hidden in his hands, while his eyes were half-closed and concealed in the shade cast by the peak of his cap pulled low over his forehead. None of the restless, bustling mass of starvelings paid him any heed. It was only Cezary who kept an eye on this figure. To begin with he suspected a likely attack or subterfuge. Later he changed his mind, as his observations had shown that his mysterious neighbor was one of the holy fools or the slightly mad. This lunatic did not chase around after food and drink like all the others; and as he sat on his rocks he kept humming something to himself. Just as all abnormal people arouse the curiosity of the mentally healthy, so this man made Cezary curious.

What sort of fellow was he? Why was he perched here in particular and not elsewhere? What was it he was humming to himself and no one else? The young digger began to pay attention in his moments of rest. His ear caught some monotonous, unchanging sound, the same thing over and again, tremulous, plaintive, ecstatic. He listened to it intently at one time of day, then another, then another. The song was always the same. In fact it comprised one sound made up of two syllables, drawn out and repeated unchangingly. There was something bizarre, unnatural, grating in all this. When the chatter of the diggers and the sound of their work quieted down, Cezary heard the singing of this mad person, in

The Coming Spring

which there could be detected something like the diminutive form of his own name:

“Czaruś...Czaruś...Czaruś...”

Unable to come to terms with the peculiar resemblance between the song of this stranger and the name he had once been called, Cezary eventually went up to the palisade, whose stakes, knocked over by the Turkish shelling, here and there still inclined towards the ground. He leaned his chest on one of these posts and stared watchfully at the old fellow. The latter stopped singing and raised his head. Then, as the expression goes, the blood rushed to Cezary's heart. He saw pale blue eyes gazing into his own eyes—eyes that were the joy of heaven. Astonishment, doubt, uncertainty, fear, joy, happiness, mad delight—all was contained in a single whisper:

“Father.”

The wretch sitting on his pile of rocks shook his head as if disagreeing with this formulation and the assertion of this truth. Once again he lowered his head onto his breast and hid his blue eyes beneath the peak of his cap. Cezary stood without moving, clutching the post convulsively. He gripped the wood as if finally to convince himself that he was not sleeping, that he was actually seeing the other man. His legs quaked. He felt like jumping. He stifled a cry within his breast. He hesitated. He grew afraid. Was it merely a resemblance in the eyes? Yet no! No! How could this person have known to sing his name for so long? And now he was singing it again:

“Czaruś...Czaruś...Czaruś...”

A heavenly smile, a smile of utter rapture, could be seen on his mouth, which was not shaded but lit by the sun. It was his father's mouth. It was the figure of his father in the rags of this vagabond. While Cezary continued to stand still as if rooted to the ground, the other man lifted himself from his rocks and, humming away, shuffled ponderously off in the direction of that least imposing of places, the wooden latrine situated between the burial trench and the soldiers' barracks.

This place was for the use both of the soldiers and of the laborers burying the bodies. The latrine had a fence in front of its open pits of excrement, to conceal the business conducted there from the eyes of others. The *brodyaga* or tramp in whom Cezary had recognized his father disappeared behind this fence. But before he did so, he looked back at Cezary and with an imperceptible nod of the head summoned him to that very place. Cezary returned to his station and for a while continued to dig strenuously, then he dropped his spade and headed quickly for the latrine. The moment he rounded the fence he was clutched in his father's arms.

Now there was no longer any doubt! These were his father's hands, eyes, mouth, chest! The young man's head rested on his father's breast with a sigh of indescribable joy and a groan of bliss. The other man's arms were wrapped about the boy. In the foul stench of the latrine, which took one's breath away, and in the midst of the other smell—the feter of rotting corpses, blown here by the swirling wind—they experienced a blessed moment of reunion, of embrace, of their first ever meeting together on this earth. A wordless voice of joy roared

The Coming Spring

from inside them. One heart quivered within them, and one blood ran in their veins. When steps were heard approaching, father and son jumped apart to opposite ends of the privy and, far removed from each other as they pretended to make use of the pits, they gave the newcomer the impression that they were entirely unaware of one another. Then, as soon as the third man had returned to work, they came back together.

"Why can't we be together openly?" asked Cezary.

"I'm afraid! The Tartars knew me here. They all knew me. One of them could turn me in out of revenge for something or other. They'd kill me. And right now I've no wish to die!"

"Why would they kill you?"

"These days there's no telling why people kill each other!"

"Mama's dead," Cezary said.

"I know."

"Have you visited her grave?"

"Yes."

"How do you know where it is?"

"From the Georgian priest."

"How on earth did you find me?"

"I found you..." said Seweryn Baryka with a quiet smile.

His eyes filled with heavy tears, which in all probability at this moment broke the dam of his tormented soul for the first time in years. He wept, sobbing noiselessly on his son's breast. The young man held his arms round him. He supported him and comforted him with trembling hands.

Houses of Glass

"Where can we meet?" Cezary asked hurriedly.

"I'll return in the night. I'll wait by the mound of stones where I always sit."

"The sentries walk around the barracks in the night."

"I know the places where the sentries walk. I've spent many a night waiting, in the hope that you might appear."

"I'll be there after midnight."

"We'll visit Mama. We can go across the fields over there."

"Where did you come from?"

Seweryn Baryka swung his hand in a semicircle, indicating the northern horizon.

"But where from?" asked the son.

"From the outside world."

"But where from?"

"From Russia."

"They told me you were dead."

A moment later Cezary howled for joy, howled like a dog:

"You're not dead! You're not dead! How happy I am!"

"And you're not dead either!"

"Where were you for so long, Papa? Where were you?"

"In the legions—far, far away—in Poland."

"Mama waited..." whispered the son.

Seweryn was unable to speak, and instead repeated his broad gesture that took in half the horizon. He muttered something cryptic and barely understandable:

"Now it's time...Now it's time—to go! To go! Will you do it?"

The Coming Spring

“Oh, I will! But with you!”

“Of course! With me!”

“Yes!”

They hugged each other once more, once more held one another in their iron embrace. Someone else was coming, so Cezary plodded back to his spade.

*

After the Turks had put an end to the barbaric massacre and to the looting their rule, which in general was marked by reasonableness and good will, did not last long. The Treaty of Versailles obliged them to withdraw from Baku and the region, allowing the Caspian coast to achieve a certain form of independence under the name of Azerbaijan. But this independence, of a small kind, was also short-lived. It was destroyed by the invasion of the Bolshevik forces, which along with the slogans of revolution brought new massacres, punishments, executions, and rapes, no less cruel and widespread than all those that had gone before.

At this time, in the late fall, before the Soviet army began to move south, Seweryn and Cezary Baryka prepared to quit Baku.

After the departure of the Turks they lived, or rather scraped by, together, as they got ready to leave. They said their farewells to the woman sleeping in the ground who was mother to one and wife to the other. They gathered funds, earning money whenever and however they could. But Cezary was not yet properly capable of earning a living, while Seweryn was unable to because he

lacked the strength. He had been worn to a shadow by the war; it had destroyed him physically. His body bore many wounds, including an injury to his skull on the top of his head. This last wound was the most troublesome, and hindered him in both physical and mental work.

They got by somehow or other, with an effort. They already wore shoes, pants, jackets, and caps, but still wanted for all those things that for someone emerging from a state of barbarity were just as necessary as shirts and shoes. They lacked the wherewithal to buy essential medication for the older man, because they were scraping together every penny for their tickets. Seweryn was anxious to recover his suitcase and told his son all kinds of amazing stories about it. This was the famous suitcase with which he had left for the war, with its splendid “pre-war” leather, its superb fittings, the monogram, the handles of twisted leather straps, the compartments and secret pockets inside! The companion of all his wartime travels had been left in Moscow with a certain countryman and friend of his, a political emissary from Poland by the name of Bolesław Jastrun. It was waiting there till the two of them arrived. The suitcase contained treasures: clean and pressed underwear both thin, thick, and woolen, handkerchiefs, and socks. Collars, cuffs, neckties! There was flannel, cotton wool that had been his wartime friend, and a thermos flask; there was aspirin and antipirin, iodine, and turpentine. There was a certain excellent and trusty medicine for the pains of the heart. Where had that slim little suitcase not traveled! In how many tight corners had it come to his relief a thousand times over! And at its very bottom lay the little memoir

The Coming Spring

concerning grandfather Kalikst Grzegorz's momentous adventure—the volume that had to be “guarded with your life.”

Seweryn Baryka said little to his son about his experiences in the war, since these things were hard for the young man to grasp and unpleasant for him to hear. Czarus was more interested in what his father had gone through as he stole back from the Polish legions, slipping and sneaking across the whole of Russia to return to the family he had left behind in far-off Baku. For he had undertaken any number of things, had been everywhere, and had employed all manner of stratagems, dissimulations, reconnaissances, tricks, and ploys; had born every sort of distress, privation, molestation, adversity, and torment, before he arrived at his destination disguised as a peasant! His extensive knowledge of Russia, its tongue, dialects, mores, and vices made it easier for him to make his way and to transform himself in various guises.

Yet the revolution piled such insuperable obstacles in his way that only boundless love was capable of overcoming them. It was this love that drove him on and led him into the vast expanses of Russia, when the physical man gasped his last in covered cattle cars; it gave him strength when he had to wait and wait, for people, for railroad cars, for permits, passes, passports, tickets, every kind of certificate, card, and stamp. It was love that taught him patience when faced with force, whims, ill will, with despicable pleasure in mischief-making for its own sake; and when faced with the despotism of commissars, masters, rulers, autocrats, and emperors in the

form of supposedly ordinary officials. It was love that gave him the power to stay the course when he was in prison, or riding with traveling merchants, or walking on foot with a horde of those migrating south. It was love that taught him lie effectively, to dream up tall stories about non-existent experiences, to play a part, act the idiot, make people laugh, flatter them, ingratiate himself with them, serve them, all the time pursuing his mission.

And so now both of them were driven toward the suitcase in Moscow, for the moment only in their dreams. But they could not conceal from one another their doubts and fears about whether it would even survive. The two great forces fighting unto death—reaction and revolution, omnipotent tsardom and the almighty proletariat—were in league against that little leather case. It was prey to laws drawn directly from the grace of God and others taken from a materialistic understanding of human history, laws of individual plunder and laws of the communist division of the goods of this world—as property that in either case warranted being summarily confiscated. For after all it contained a certain fragment of the civilization of a world condemned to destruction, and yet which also inspired secret desires. There was no doubt that the old world could pillage by the grace of God, while the new world would storm this last bastion of reaction. Cezary was at a crossroads. He thought with revulsion about the support he was lending even in his imagination to the old order, concealing the hiding place and the very fact of possession of the conspiratorial suitcase; on the other hand he was unable to stop himself dreaming of socks, handkerchiefs—even

The Coming Spring

of a necktie! Moreover, surely he could not deny his father the right to long for aspirin and antipirin, of which he so frequently had need.

How often did the old man sigh:

“Oh, if only I had a packet of Bayer aspirin! I’d get better right away...”

Without those aspirins he was often feverish and sickly; he shivered and suffered from headaches.

*

They set off in the winter on a boat sailing for Tsaritsyn,¹⁷ dressed as workers previously employed in the “oil mines” and now, as a result of the upheavals and the discontinuation of their jobs, going back home to Moscow. They had false passports supplied by certain circles that supported the project of their return to Poland. Dressed in typical workers’ clothing, speaking to one another in perfect Russian, whose finer points they were thoroughly familiar with, their heads shaved in the customary manner, they were perfect “comrades” of the new order that had taken over across the vastnesses of the Soviet lands. And so they completed the maritime portion of their journey and from Tsaritsyn headed north by train. This second part of the trek was more arduous than the first. Naturally they rode in a freight car. In this box containing forty people the warmth came from the bodies of their fellow-travelers and from

¹⁷ Subsequently Stalingrad, today Volgograd.

the fire that had been built in the middle of the car, since it was extremely cold. They slept side by side, wrapped in sheepskins. The train kept stopping and would stand inordinately long, sometimes for days and nights on end, at any little railroad stop. It halted for no apparent reason and would suddenly set off again without warning and heedless of any passengers who may have been left behind. These stops filled young Baryka with despair—it was the first time he had journeyed to the outside world, and he was eager to see it. Instead they had to mind their places so as not to be stranded in the middle of the desolate steppe. And so he lay there with his father, who was wasting away and suffocating in the merciless fug of the car; they slept a great deal and talked together. By a stroke of good fortune their closest three neighbors were wild men from the far side of the Caspian, Asian-eyed Parthians¹⁸ who spoke no Russian. The next passenger beyond them spent the whole time asleep, waking only every so often to utter a terrifying yawn and then return to his slumber. Other inhabitants of that moving prison prepared food; the women nursed sickly, crying children and the men conducted furious arguments with one another, played cards and sang songs. Once they were sure that their neighbors were indifferent or harmless, father and son started speaking Polish.

Cezary's Polish bore traces of Russian, but nevertheless was good and fluent. He used the language gladly, so as to bring his father pleasure. In the course of their

¹⁸ See footnote 15.

The Coming Spring

conversations Cezary frequently asked his father what would come next. He realized that right now they were on their way for the suitcase; but what then?

“What’s to become of us? Where will we go?”

“To Poland,” Seweryn would reply.

“What for?”

For a long time the older man put off his answer, promising that he would provide it later.

At last, at one of the stops that lasted so long they had given up hope of ever setting off again, lying side by side huddled together for warmth as if they were a single body, Cezary’s father began to offer his reply concerning why they should make for Poland. The air in the car was so close and rancid that Seweryn was like the Greek oracle whose tripod stood over a vent emitting stupefying gases.¹⁹ He spoke with eyes closed, dizzy from the poisonous fustiness that rose from those wanderers crossing the boundless plains of Russia.

*

“We’re going to Poland,” he said, “because a new civilization has begun there.”

“What kind of civilization?”

“Well, listen and I’ll tell you....”

“I’m listening.”

“There’s a certain man who was born in Poland and who bears the same name as you and I—Baryka; he is a man of genius.”

¹⁹ The reference is to the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi.

“Really? You never told me about this before. What sort of man is he? Is he a relative of ours?”

“Indeed he is. Baryka’s his name. There are many things I’ve not told you about myself, because I’ve changed a great deal in recent times and I didn’t want to irk you with my affairs. I’m completely different from what I was like before. You knew a different father in your childhood to the man you see before you now. Such was my fate. During my time in Poland, at war and in the legions I changed fundamentally. It was as if someone had turned my soul upside down. But that’s not what we’re talking about now.”

“So who’s this Baryka?”

“This person demonstrated uncanny abilities even while he was still at school, especially in the field of mathematics. But when he graduated from grammar school he chose to study medicine.”

“You always used to suggest medicine to me too, when I was still a schoolboy in the third class...”

“That’s right. I wanted you to become a doctor. But nothing came of it. The war, the turmoil of the revolution...”

““The turmoil of the revolution,” repeated Cezary irritably.

“As you wish. We can give it the most resounding names. Anyway, the man I’m talking about graduated from medical school and even began to practice. And he had his own amazing medications...But more about that later...”

“You have to tell it all in order...”

The Coming Spring

"First of all I'll tell what's most important. So, can you imagine it, this Baryka abandoned medicine and all his discoveries in that domain. He left Warsaw..."

"Oh, so he was in that Warsaw of yours...", the callow youth whispered in disappointment.

"In Warsaw. This Baryka went off to the Baltic Sea, where he spent a long time walking along the coast and studying the dunes, the coastal hills that are formed of drifting sand as fine and loose as can be."

"What did he need to do that for?"

"Just a minute! He started buying up these dunes from private owners, including infertile land where not even seaside grasses grew, where not even crows would perch nor gulls find what they need to weave their nests. People sold off all that waste land and barren terrain, pleased to find some fool who would pay ready money for it—especially because this was at a time when there were rumors that part of the coast would be incorporated into Poland, and so the Germans were quickly disposing of any property they had in those regions. Our doctor managed to amass a sizeable stretch of coastline covered with unbroken sand that reached several kilometers inland, covering a huge area. Though I forget what the damn place was called..."

"And what then?"

"He had long chains of these dunes extending one after another every which way. And the sea kept tossing up the purest sand onto that coastline of Baryka's."

"The sea always has a tendency to throw up sand onto the beach."

“You’re absolutely right, though that isn’t a very polite way of putting it.”

“I don’t see anything impolite in what I just said.”

“Since what you said isn’t impolite, *eo ipso* it’s a polite remark. We continue to learn into our old age, my little one. For instance I’ve just this minute learned what politeness is like amongst young revolutionaries. But let’s go back to Doctor Baryka. It transpired that some of the land he bought from a German landowner, which was situated on a promontory jutting out into the sea, had once, in ancient times, been the bed of a prehistoric river, since beyond the coastal dunes there was a narrow strip of peat bogs. The peat itself lay nine meters deep. Beneath it was pure, unadulterated, golden sand, the same as in the coastal sandhills, but of course older than them by dozens or hundreds of centuries. Who knows!...”

“So what did the doctor do?”

“Doctor Baryka imported from America via Gdańsk a huge, bizarre machine that in a single operation dug up and laid aside the nine-meter-thick layer of peat in greater amounts than a hundred people could have done in the space of an entire week.”

“Now there’s a first-rate machine for you!”

“You don’t believe me? Then just listen and see what happened. Our cousin Baryka dried the peat in special drying sheds and sold it as fuel; and in the huge peat bog he gradually dug out a channel nine meters deep and a dozen or so wide, describing a semicircle that turned back and rejoined the sea at its outlet. He created something like an immense letter U, its bottom facing the land

The Coming Spring

and its two widely spaced upper arms connected to the sea. These two ends he opened to the sea once both sides of the channel had been timbered.”

“What a strange channel! And what next?”

“The whole channel lies below sea level, even lower than the sea bed near the beach, where the level of the sea has risen because of the sands continually being cast up onto the shore. This whole arrangement depended on a study of the sea in this place. Our namesake thoroughly researched the sea at the point where it initially flowed past the coast, paying special attention to a certain strong coastal current which runs from the ocean via Zund, Kattegat and Skagerrak²⁰ in an easterly direction. Our Baryka arranged the left arm of the U-shaped channel so that it faced this current coming from the west; in such a way he directed a powerful mass of water into the channel. He introduced this westerly current into one end of the channel and let it out at the other end. The mass of water raced through the channel at a mighty rush. Along the channel he built factories powered by turbines that were placed at intervals along its entire length. Well, in fact there was really only one great factory—a massive glassworks.”

“Were you there, Papa?”

Seweryn Baryka said after pausing for reflection:

“Indeed I was! Would I tell you stories to your face if I hadn’t been?”

“But what’s this got to do with the ‘new civilization’?”

²⁰ The straits between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea.

Houses of Glass

"What do you mean! That was where the new civilization began."

"From one glassworks?"

"That's right!"

"I have the feeling this civilization is the fragile kind that breaks easily."

"Quite the opposite! It's the strongest thing there is in this vale of iron and concrete."

"Glass is easily breakable."

"Not this glass! Baryka—our namesake—produces glass girders. With the aid of the prodigious energy he gets for free from the westerly current, especially from the west winds that blow almost constantly in that place, he has an endless supply of electricity by means of which he melts down the coastal sand..."

"This is his secret, of course?"

"It is. From the vast liquid mass he extracts ready-made beams, slabs, wedges, and keystones, molded, or rather cast, according to an architectonic plan. A whole single-story house of glass, with walls perfectly matched up to beams that come together in a crown and can be welded in the space of a single hour, and with floor, ceiling, and roof made of panels—all this can be handed over to the buyer ready for use. In the rural houses of this kind, what used to be called peasant houses, there are no stoves. In the winter hot water circulates around the walls, inside the beams, in every room. Glass vents in the ceiling regulate the desired temperature and constantly let in fresh air."

"In the summer a little house like that must get as hot as the market square in Baku during the dog days."

The Coming Spring

“You’re mistaken, o one of little faith! In the summer, cold water circulates through the same ducts around every room. The water cools the walls; as a result, even in the greatest swelter it’s as cool there as in our cellar in Baku, but without the damp and the bad smell. The very same water constantly washes the glass floors, walls, and ceilings, bringing cool and cleanliness. It doesn’t even require any special upkeep, since pipes carrying the used water and other waste empty into glass latrines dug in the ground at a distance.”

“These are display cabinets, dammit, not houses for people!”

“Cabinets they are indeed. Your Polish peasant, who as one might say is not overly concerned with cleanliness, as is always the case in the country, where people work around cows, horses, goats and sheep—like it or not, he has to keep things clean, you see, so that it shouldn’t become too hot in his glass cottage. His woman is continually washing down the cottage, all the walls and floor—and there’s not a trace of damp, because there’s nothing that could rot or go moldy, or smell from visible or invisible dirt, since all the utensils, all the furniture and fittings—everything is made of glass.”

“It’s enough to drive a person mad!”

“Mad indeed, but mad with admiration. Because these houses are designed by artists. Great artists. Today there are hundreds of them. And I tell you, these are not dullards, snobs, or beggars producing foolish nonsense, or some laughable, derivative oddities for rich folk bored with each other and with the artists. No; they’re wise,

Houses of Glass

practical people, conscious and inspired creators who make objects that are decorative and handsome but also serviceable, in great numbers, of all different kinds, brilliant and worth reproducing as widely as possible—for the workers, for their brothers, for the common people. The houses are of various colors depending on the character of the neighborhood and the artist's inspiration, but also the preferences of those who live in them. Against the background of wooded areas there are snow-white houses; on the plains they're pink, and among hills they're pale green with a hint of purple, or the color of nasturtiums. The houses are decorated in the richest, most imaginative and inventive ways according to the instructions of the artists and the taste of the buyers, because the wall beams and roofing slabs can be dyed any color one wishes while they're still in their liquid state. Anything that the colorist's boundless imagination can conceive and see through the divine mystery of the human eye, the gifts of the heavens, the human gaze; any hue at all that appears amid the splendor of flowers on the meadow in late June—all this, all of it, is captured in the artist's inspiration, formed by creative consciousness, artistic wisdom, and a diligent act of will—and all can be seen in the interiors and exteriors of the colorful modern cottages of the Polish peasants. These are true futuristic dreams brought to reality in tractable, pliant glass."

"And you saw all this there? Villages like that? Papa!"

"Yes indeed! Entire neighborhoods, districts, provinces! Because it spread like the plague once people found out about it. Who would want to live in a decay-

The Coming Spring

ing, moldy wooden sty being eaten away by dry rot, or in a hovel that's a breeding ground for rheumatism and tuberculosis and scarlet fever, in a stone-built prison stinking of damp and mice, amid walls on which all kinds of sickness have taken root? The houses of glass are extraordinarily cheap, for there's no need for any bricklayers, carpenters, joiners, or roofers in their construction. Nothing but the materials themselves, transportation to the site and two or three technicians to assemble them. The house itself, aside from the foundations, can be put up in the space of three or four days. It's just a matter of assembling matching parts produced in the factory. Even with the remuneration for the artists the material costs no more at the coast than construction timber would cost locally. I need say nothing about bricks, lime, and the wages of laborers constantly going on strike because of rising prices."

"Don't they go on strike in the factory belonging to this cousin of ours?"

"No. The factory is held in cooperative ownership by the workers, technicians, and artists. Baryka himself continues to build new turbines and glassworks and moves on. Such is the will of his genius."

"What does he move on to?"

"To his distant purposes. Today Polish villages are still unsatisfactorily organized. It's still the case that each house of glass is heated in the winter and cooled in the summer by its own individual boiler and its own kitchen attached to the building. Even now the boilers can be heated with very little fuel, directing warmth through the ducts and turning a little country cottage into a kind of

thermos flask that maintains its own temperature. But this is not the ideal. Every village should have a communal heating and cooling plant. For such a thing, however, the electrification of the whole country is needed. The same applies to the pumping of water. Today household wells are used; often they're polluted and function poorly. Yet already the increased use and consumption of boiled water at home has led to fewer instances of infectious diseases."

"Is that everything?"

"There's more, son. Since the Vistula along its entire length, and all its tributaries, found itself flowing through the Polish national state, Baryka exploited the course of its waters just as he had made use of the salt-water ocean current flowing from west to east. He began to encase the great river in a bed of glass. In one of the coastal glassworks he produces special materials. They consist of massive, thick, wedge-shaped slabs with one sharp edge, which slot into one other with the aid of grooves and are strong and durable enough to resist any force; reinforced with hooks and glass bosses and resting on supports, they're lowered into the sandy or eroded banks of the river. The river itself, normally broad and with a tendency to overflow, is confined to a channel half its usual width. The way in which the glass walls are created is simple, almost primitive, little more than carpentry. The work of taking these wedge-shaped slabs, slim as razor blades at the bottom and at the top thick as fortress walls, and attaching them to the river bed at a great depth, is unutterably quick. Along the parts of the river where both banks have been encased

The Coming Spring

in this smooth lining, all flooding and blockages have ceased to occur, since the speed of the rushing water carries away ice floes, and there's a special mechanism that prevents the ice from interfering with the current."

"So the river doesn't freeze over?"

"It does, but in its glass lining engineer Baryka is in complete control of its freezing and thawing. The waters that are enclosed in the narrow channel work summer and winter. They turn a series of turbines, and before long they'll be turning a thousand of them. Boundless electrical power has replaced the power of horses and oxen. In the entire river valley brought under control the ploughs and all other kinds of agricultural implement are driven by electricity. Already in those places wood has become an untouchable, sacred thing, and noble beasts have been given back their dignity—that of the Egyptian bull-god Apis or the black steed of the ancient Slavic god Swarożyc."

"The dignity of an ox heading for the slaughterhouse to be turned into dignified steaks."

"Not necessarily. In the new civilization people won't necessarily eat the flesh of our elder Darwinian brothers. It won't be hard for the Polish peasants; in fact it'll be no sacrifice for them, since today they hardly ever eat meat except on rare occasions, perhaps on the so-called high holidays. If they can be relieved of the infectious diseases they suffer from today and the filth and foul air of their squalid living quarters, they'll become the healthiest race on earth. And the less back-breaking work they have on the land, the less meat they'll need to eat."

"These are dreams! Dreams!"

Houses of Glass

“Dreams, my young revolutionary? Let’s talk about the new villages of glass. They’re no longer prone to fire, and lightning does not strike them. In some settlements the cottages are linked by glass walkways. Large communal cattle sheds and glass pigsties make it possible to develop new forms of dairy production and co-operative hog farms. The stinking shed for one consumptive cow is a thing of the past, as is the even more noxious pigsty for a single filthy pig bearing a million pathogenic germs on its skin and in its belly. In the new farms the pigs are fed on dairy by-products, and in village butcher’s shops they’re processed into outstanding hams and sausages.”

“Are these the same vegetarians you mentioned before, or some other, carnivorous folk?”

“Different people, specialists—masters in the ideals and idylls of hogs.”

“So you could say this new Polish civilization isn’t made of glass so much as of pig.”

“Why do you say that, son? It’s not based on the noble pig alone. The main role is played by glass. The agricultural reforms they’re presently considering there, however minimal they end up being, won’t just be a theoretical, impractical piece of paper, but realistic and effective. They’ll create new houses of glass and distribute them across the broad open spaces, the fallow ground, and the fields and woods of the former latifundia. The matter of light and electric power will be more difficult. But there’ll be more and more of both from one month to the next, as more of the Vistula is lined with glass walls. There’ll be so much light and electricity

The Coming Spring

that it will reach everywhere. Before long we'll see new tools for ploughing, sowing, harvesting and threshing, all driven by that blessed power."

"Well, we'll see."

"And what will you say about schools of glass! About churches springing up on hilltops in accordance with the will and imagination of the artists, in shapes so beautiful that everything there's been up till now pales in comparison and is eclipsed."

"This whole new civilization of yours seems to be bursting out like fireworks, father."

"Where there are great inventions, or rather unexpected discoveries, revealing that which lay beside us all the time yet was hidden—at such times, once the new ideas are applied and used everything bursts out like fireworks. Fifty years ago who would have believed it would be possible to put a racehorse on an aeroplane and carry it up to the clouds, and even above the clouds, from Paris to Antwerp? And yet it's the case that the hippogriff,²¹ the fruit of Ariosto's imagination, really does fly above the clouds. And so the old cities, those fearful banes of the old civilization, will start to disappear; they'll become museum exhibits or centers for banks, stores, warehouses, magazines of whole countries, depots of goods—and new garden cities will arise, residential cities, extending amid fields and woods and hills, spread across neighborhoods along the tracks of electric trains and trams."

²¹ A mythical winged creature with the head of a griffin and the body of a horse.

“Really...”

“Son! The workers’ apartment buildings in Warsaw that Baryka is planning—and I was fortunate enough to see those plans—are more comfortable, healthier, cleaner, and more beautiful than the most fanciful palaces of the aristocracy, or the villas of American millionaires, or even the residences of kings. Two rooms, but the cleanest, healthiest, most lovely two rooms you could hope for—is that not what every solitary individual dreams of?”

“It seems to me there’s a tiny bit too much cleanliness in all this. It needs to be leavened with a modicum of dirt. And as concerns the aforementioned bourgeoisie and the *ci-devant* monarchs, I imagine they’d rather have their old lifestyle back. They’d prefer a little apartment, say, like the one we used to have in Baku—eh, papa? like we had once in Baku—with five or six rooms, even if they’re built of stone, rather than these glass constructions continually being rinsed in water.”

“Not at all! Not bit of it! Because it transpires that, precisely because of our Baryka’s invention, the symbol of wealth is neither money nor an accumulation of expensive objects and precious trinkets, but—health. The richest banker, or his excellency the magnate, having ruined his nerves through overeating and overdrinking, hears his doctor advise him: your excellency ought to go and live in the country, and wear coarse peasant clothing without hat or shoes. This lordly gourmet needs to eat wholemeal bread, buckwheat, turnips and radish, and chew garlic. He should avoid wine and alcohol like the plague, and also coffee, tea, and other delicacies. The

The Coming Spring

one who commands workers should himself work in the garden—in the sun—with hoe and spade and pitchfork and flail; he who lived by night and slept by day should rise with the birds and go to bed at the same time as the chickens...What does all this mean? It means that good health—a good appetite and thirst, solid sleep after heavy physical labor—these are the only riches of the rich man. And it's precisely a house of glass that can provide, guarantee, and maintain complete health. Hygiene, comfort, absolute cleanliness. Work, calm, inner satisfaction, and good humor. It's just this sort of protection from the severity of human nature and its fearful toxins that the middle classes will strive for in seeking to become healthy and stay that way. I'm worried that they'll create such a huge call for houses of glass that there won't be enough for the poor people. Luckily..."

"No fear! They'll look into this thing thoroughly—your bourgeoisie are the shrewdest folk, even though as a class they're no longer good for anything. If they can sniff out something that's to their own advantage, they'll have our cousin Baryka build them villas and palaces the like of which the world has never seen."

"Luckily he won't agree to putting up anything in the towns and villages except workers' apartment buildings, hospitals, museums, centers for intellectual workers, and others for ordinary, average people wearied by the present struggle."

"He must be some kind of philanthropist. A benefactor. The poor fellow's likely to exhaust himself before the villainous theft of former wealth is eradicated from

the whole of the earth. The villain in humanity has to be eradicated first; only then will it be possible to create a normal life.”

“Who can say which person among us is a villain and which is just.”

“It’s only too obvious. The villain inside a person needs to be smothered by force, and if it won’t submit, it should be killed!”

“Thou shalt not kill! Son! Thou shalt not kill!”

“Evil in the world should always be killed. We kill worms, snakes, wolves, or lice.”

“First of all, we’re not entirely certain what is evil and what for sure is good. Second, the only thing that arises from killing is the crime of murder. Killing is utterly unnecessary. It’s a waste of time and of the health of the human soul. All that’s needed is to build a new life. To build it from scratch, from the very beginning, from the clay of the earth and the earth’s pure, deep-flowing waters.”

“Mama already tried to explain that to me in her Siedlce way. You old folk don’t understand anything.”

“We understand, but we don’t restrict ourselves to that one single understanding alone. Our cousin Baryka took a handful of sand that everyone else scorned, breathed into it his own intention and in the manner of God said: ‘With this handful of sand I create a world of new phenomena. Invention is the only true revolution. The violent seizure of things made by others is a false revolution.’”

“But it’s things possessed by others, not made by them! Possessed unlawfully.”

The Coming Spring

“Those who drive the lord from his palace and take possession of it—did they build that palace themselves?”

“They take it into shared, common possession.”

“‘Common possession,’ while the palaces are occupied by the new lords, the commissars, diplomats, directors, and all the new authorities—the new usurpers. The common people go on living in stinking cottages and in the wretched hovels of the city.”

“The old villainy hasn’t yet been eliminated. The struggle is still continuing.”

“That struggle will continue for a long, long time. The savior of the world taught the world in the Sermon on the Mount that even manifest evil shouldn’t be countered with force.”

“Here we go! Old stuff and nonsense. If I see someone next to me selling a child into iniquity or teaching it iniquity—if I see another person stealing the labor of a thousand others—I’m not supposed to challenge it?”

“Challenge, prohibition, punishment! All this is neither advisable nor effective; and it comes down to the same thing. Envy and hatred can be eliminated in people only through the creation of new values and the propagation of new goods. It’s possible to devise working and living conditions such that there’ll be nothing to hate and nothing to kill for. It really is an absurd upheaval that sends the lords from palace to cellar and puts the inhabitants of the cellars in the palaces. That is truly the work and the dwelling of the insane. Such is my conviction.”

Houses of Glass

“Mine is different. Entirely different!”

“Then let’s talk of it no more. Why should we speak in vain assertions and refutations. I won’t argue with you any more. And you in turn should be so kind as to enrich your store of knowledge with one detail. I saw a village school constructed according to the new plans. The rooms there were so lovely that every child ran to them with the greatest joy. There were hot and cold showers, a kitchen, a cafeteria, a concert hall and a movie theater...”

“Like modern-day Roman baths...”

“Today the mothers—mindful of the name of that great monarch of theirs who with the motions of his genius rebuilds the world as an abode of good, and relieves those mothers of their burden by taking it in his own arms—those mothers say humbly: ‘Blessed is the womb that bore thee and the paps which thou hast sucked...’”²²

*

The journey to Moscow took an extraordinarily long time. But eventually that journey too was over. The train crawled into the outskirts of the historic city. Yet this was not their final destination, and so they had to change roles and costumes. It would have been hard to pretend to be Russian workers setting off for Poland. And so in Moscow the Barykas senior and junior trans-

²² From Luke 11.27 (King James Version).

The Coming Spring

formed themselves into ordinary foreign “intelligentsia,” or what were called Polish “optants.”²³

Their metamorphosis was greatly aided by the suitcase, which had been waiting patiently for its owners in the apartment of Bogumił Jastrun. This Jastrun had had troubles aplenty with the case—as he moved from one place to another he had to take it with him and look after someone else’s things. Nevertheless, he had preserved the entrusted item in its entirety. In the suitcase father and son not only found underwear and clothing for themselves, but there was also enough underwear to give some to the virtuous Jastrun. To say nothing of soap, accessories, and medications, which seemed to have been sent from heaven! At the bottom lay the small leather-bound volume with its finely crafted fittings, an enduring memento of Grandfather Kalikst.

Cezary, who had so longed to see Moscow for the first time, along with its Bolshevik system of government, was moved and thrilled when he put on the underwear he had not seen for so long, and the clothes that fit him like his own skin. Both he and his father were delighted, and they strutted about the streets and squares as pleased with themselves as if each had swallowed a peacock complete with outspread tail. They ambled about the city and admired its various wonders.

But Mr. Jastrun advised them against strolling idly around, and in general against staying long in the “white-stoned” capital of the tsars. There was little to eat, and

²³ Poles who found themselves in Soviet Russia were given the “option” of choosing Polish citizenship and returning to Poland.

the public canteens required exact documentation of one's place of work. And so they waited in Moscow only until they could obtain a place on an *eshelon*, in other words a train bearing various stranded individuals to the Polish border. Having gotten the necessary papers, they were crammed into a train that was filled to the last place since in the course of its long journey it had been collecting Poles from goodness knows where, from mountain, sea and steppe. Room was found for two more. With great difficulty they dragged the suitcase in behind them. The train was headed for Kharkov, where it was to terminate. All the travelers were to wait in Kharkov for another train, which was to appear only after a certain time. They set off.

If the journey from the shores of the Caspian Sea had been long and wearisome, that from Moscow to Kharkov was sheer torture. The cars were filled with people many of whom carried with them and upon them all the possessions they had acquired during their long lives. The engineer driving the train was fully aware of this fact. And so here and there, in a town or on its outskirts, and sometimes in the middle of nowhere, the train would come to a halt and stand motionless. It would stand there an hour, two hours, five, ten, fifteen, twenty hours. The passengers would beg the engineer to drive on; the conductor, who by the very nature of things was in a position of authority over the repatriates, would negotiate with him. The engineer would declare baldly that his locomotive needed some *remontik* or small repair. He would then work on this *remontik* until such time as the conductor or one of the passengers passed

The Coming Spring

through the train and organized a whip-round for the speedy repair of the engine. Whoever had currency of any value would give currency. Those who lacked currency could give valuables such as rings, watch-chains, even watches, even shoes and overcoats. In this regard the autocrat of the railroad evinced great forbearance and caused no difficulties: shoes, fine; an overcoat, let it be an overcoat! As soon as enough objects or money had been gathered to satisfy the engineer's ambitions and avoid insulting his personal dignity, the *remontik* would be completed. The train would whistle, puff, and set off, rumbling along sometimes faster, sometimes slower, and moving down the track to the next mysterious point in some small town or the middle of the countryside. It would be asked if another *remontik* was needed, and if an affirmative answer was forthcoming, they would set about arranging another collection of currency and valuables. The closer they drew to the longed-for destination of Kharkov, the more often the locomotive required essential repairs and the longer the stops lasted. Supplies ran out or went bad; in the agonizing cold the sick moaned, children cried, people descended into a dull torpor or a nervous unease, while the goodly engineer would sit on the steps of the locomotive puffing away at a cigarette, staring into the distance and humming some plaintive folk melody.

The last stop came at the engineer's bidding ten versts²⁴ from Kharkov. For some reason it was in exactly

²⁴ Verst (Russ: *verstá*): A Russian measure of distance, equivalent to about two-thirds of a mile.

this spot that the *eshelon* was going to terminate its course. Some of the passengers, especially the women and children, decided to wait—who knew, perhaps it would set off again? Others, less patient and with stronger legs, set off for the city on foot.

The Barykas were part of the latter group. They took turns carrying the suitcase on their backs and they reached the city. They found the railway station, went to the left luggage office and deposited the case containing everything they possessed, including all their papers, their paltry medicinal treasures, cotton wool, and flannels. When they paid the fee, the Kharkov left luggage office gave them a receipt with a red stamp the size of a large saucer. Carefully putting away this documentation of their property, they hurried off to the Polish office to seek information concerning the train to the border.

In front of the office, however, they found a long line of unhappy people awaiting their turn. They had to stand in the queue and wait. They took turns keeping their place. One “lined up,” while the other tramped through the mud of a Kharkov thaw in search of somewhere to stay, for it seemed more than likely they would have to tarry a while in Kharkov. That very same day Seweryn Baryka, who generally speaking demonstrated greater acumen than his son, found a place in the apartment of a certain tailor who still “spoke Polish language” a little, since he was “originally from Warsaw.” This half-countryman fleeced the travelers nobly and agreed to let them stay in his less than fragrant quarters. Seweryn Baryka gave the tailor an advance in old roubles that he still had hidden in the

The Coming Spring

lining of his coat, and returned to the line in front of the Polish office.

It transpired from what those leaving the office had to say, and finally, after a long wait, from the conversation with the clerk inside, that there was absolutely no question of a train appearing in the next few days. There was the promise that such a train was on its way from the distant Urals and was supposed to arrive, but nothing was known about when this might happen. The official added the further joyless information that even if the train did arrive, it would be filled to bursting.

And so nothing remained but to go to the tailor's. Before this, though, they set off for the railroad station to collect their suitcase, since without it it was hard even to imagine settling in to their new quarters. Fortunately the left luggage office was still open and the same *paren'* or fellow who had received the suitcase sat by the open window. The Barykas showed him the deposit slip with the red stamp and the number and asked for their baggage. The clerk took the paper from them and went to bring the case. But for a long time he did not come back. They waited impatiently, since night had fallen and they wanted to settle in to the place where they were staying. Finally the *paren'* reappeared, but without the case. He declared with a sympathetic expression that there was no such suitcase in the storage room.

"How is that possible, comrade?" Cezary explained to the man. "Here's the number that you yourself wrote. And you yourself stuck the same number on the *chemo-*

dan.²⁵ You took it directly from me. And you yourself put it in the storage room. Isn't that right?"

"I may have put it there. I put a lot of things in there. I may have written the number and stuck it on. I write lots of numbers and stick them on. That's my job. You know, comrade, that's my job..." he added with a sigh, rolling his eyes.

"Well then, go back and have a good look!"

"I've looked," said the clerk reluctantly. "I've searched in every corner. It's not there! I'm telling you the truth, comrade—it's not there!"

"How can it not be there!" said the elder Baryka, flaring up. "Here's the slip, the deposit was paid, everything's in order—the luggage has to be there!"

"Just for you I'll go back and look again..." sighed the honest fellow.

He went off. Once again he searched for a long time. Yet he came back with a despondent sigh:

"Your suitcase isn't there..."

"Then where's it gotten to?" the two of them asked, shouting over one another in their passion.

"How should I know where it's gotten to? It isn't there."

"Come on now, comrade," said Cezary cajolingly. "Here's the slip..."

"Enough about the slip!" retorted the other man, not without anger. "I see the slip, but I don't see your little *chemodan*. Do you get it?"

²⁵ Suitcase (Russ.).

The Coming Spring

“What have you done with it?” fumed Cezary.

“How should I know what’s happened to it? It’s not there!”

“They’ve stolen my suitcase!” cried Seweryn in his fury.

“Thieves!” added Cezary.

“Give me back my property!” shouted the older man, grabbing the left luggage clerk by the sleeve.

The latter phlegmatically removed Baryka’s hand with his own powerful right hand, and no less phlegmatically declared:

“Listen, comrade! Stop making so much noise. You’d be better off keeping quiet. What’ll happen if because of your stupid suitcase you end up at the secret police instead of in that Poland of yours?”

Seweryn Baryka shook his head dismally and plunged deep in thought. He gave a sigh. They walked away in silence. Once they were outside the railway building Cezary murmured:

“You won’t have any antipirin for your headaches. You won’t have any aspirin. We don’t have the suitcase!”

“I’ll get over that. But tell me, Czarus, tell me...I ‘guarded it with my life,’ that little book. It was with me through hundreds of adventures when I was staring death in the face. And then I lose it in such a stupid, such an incredibly stupid way. How could I have trusted them with it! What an old ass I am! I’ll not be able to leave you that book...”

“It’s not important, papa...”

Cezary intended to add that he already knew what was in the book, but he glanced at his father’s face and fell

silent. They waded through puddles and fresh snow on their way to the tailor's.

Alas, the wait for a new repatriation train lasted two weeks. Two long and trying weeks. Punished for the pride of owning a clean change of clothes, they now went around in dirty clothing and had no need to cover their noses around their neighbors. Having tasted the delights of bourgeois refinements, they suffered painfully when those refinements were taken away. They no longer had anything to sell, since the money they had had with them had run out. Their host, the wretched little tailor "originally from Warsaw," refused to even consider letting them stay in his apartment once he learned that their *chemodan* had been sequestered. They accepted the most menial jobs in order to survive such an onerous time.

They took turns waiting in front of the Polish office for news of a train; they were truly like beggars. And there was nothing else they could do—except perhaps to take up a staff and set off westwards on foot. For that the older man lacked the strength. In addition, he had repeated attacks of sickness. While he was feverish he had to lie in a cubby hole under some stairs where he was allowed to rest during the day. Hundreds of people ran up and down the stairs right above Seweryn's head, and his son had to listen to it all with gritted teeth and clenched fists. When he appeared in the Bolshevik offices and tried to demand a place to stay, he was snarled at, though he advertised his views and even his revolutionary actions in Baku. Yet he was a Polish repatriatee. They knew all about painted foxes like him. He was un-

The Coming Spring

successful. His fellow countrymen on the other hand were in no hurry to offer help, since he himself did not ask for it.

*

During this time Cezary grew close to his father as he once had to his mother. A profound sorrow and the sharp tug of a painful inner feeling of pity joined and intertwined with a lust for life. He was now able to observe the vigor of the revolution in its first flowering. He learned about the various organizations: *Rtucheka* and *Gubcheka*, *Gubispolkom*, *Narobraz*, *Narkompros*, *Sovnar-kom*.²⁶ He would sometimes see sailors with square or round phizzogs, sunburned and ruddy as frying pans, hurtling across Kharkov in automobiles, headed in some direction or other. They radiated a human, masculine, unshakeable power. They sang their revolutionary songs, which had been born in the howling gale on mutinying battleships, when the officers who had once slapped them in those square or round mugs of theirs, now had large conical artillery shells strapped to their legs and were tossed into the depths so they could “dance a wee jig” on the floor of the Black Sea. He visited assembly halls packed, not with Tartars and Armenians at one another’s throats, as had been the case in Baku, but with working people—Russians, Ukrainians, Romanians, Jews, Poles, folk from all over the place, but united, at

²⁶ Cultural and political institutions of the early Soviet period.

one—the workers. He listened to first-rate orators, of many different backgrounds, propounding and advancing the interests of the revolution in a manner that was inexorably logical, clear, and invincible. He was especially impressed by the speakers of Jewish origin. They in particular showed the genius of their race with a phenomenal clear-sightedness; they were able to penetrate to the most profound quiddities, to the very core of human affairs; they uncovered the weakness of the dying world of the bourgeoisie and its sick, gangrenous, atrophied places, and they offered the working folk their extraordinary insights into the essence and power of the radical change that was currently in progress.

When he found himself in the crowd of listeners, in the working throng that gave a heavy yet joyful sigh at the speaker's every salutary syllogism, since that calm argumentation seemed to remove from the immense masses of the oppressed their burden of adversity—and also the necessity, the curse, and the wretched destiny of dwelling under the yoke—Cezary would sigh just as deeply as they did. How he longed at such moments to part from his father, to send him off to that unknown world, the mythical land of Poland, and to remain here among the wise and the strong! How he longed to play his part in the task of razing to the ground the world of the former villainy! He admired and adored this incomparable upheaval, which appeared to human eyes as the most powerful act since the dawn of the world, and one derived from the logical conclusions of a brilliant geometrician who had used his system of triangulation of the unknown to

The Coming Spring

divide and measure the globe differently than anyone before, even the most powerful of tyrants.

But when the young enthusiast returned to the cubbyhole beneath the stairs, he felt that it was beyond him. This father of his, someone new to him whom he did not know well, was not a passive creature of the emotions alone, like his mother. He was an active adversary. He was a knight. From the wounds that covered his body there seeped not only blood, but a kind of dazzling light. It was not just that he believed in something different, but that he dared to shape the world in a different way. What he said was vague, dreamed up by his broken head, amusing even; but it was something that Cezary truly had to cross swords with. Was this man a bourgeois, a champion of the rich and of those who toady to the rich?—no. Was he a supporter of the old order?—no. Then what was it—why did he refuse to collaborate with the revolution? After all, he was familiar with the power that had released the workers of the world from the shackles clapped on them by the industrialists and the profiteers. He had attended all kinds of rallies in Moscow and had listened to the most interesting speakers. Not only this—on his way to Baku he had traveled the length of Russia, burrowing right through it like the rock-boring piddock mollusc that passes through mighty cliffs in its blindness. He knew not only the public agit-meetings and the half-public government agencies built on the foundations of the old trash, but also the secret chancelleries of the new despots, the spy-infested recesses and the loathsome prisons in which as a result of suspicions and spylike denunciations he had

been locked up side by side with those who were to be led out to the light solely in order to be exterminated. He knew cellars spattered and running with blood, and filled with the stench of corpses. He was wont to say it was this cadaverous smell that made it impossible to breathe the air of Moscow with free and happy lungs. In this foul atmosphere left behind after mass secret murders and bloody orgies, it was out of the question to pray together in a great crowd: "Our father, who art in heaven..." "Moscow," he would say, "stinks of iniquity. There everything is conceived in iniquity, and it'll end with the great and illustrious careers of the new masters of Russia, who will move into the palaces of the tsars and the Yusupovs; they'll don fine robes and create a new aristocracy of Soviet officials and commissars, a new plutocracy even, wallowing in the excess and corruption of the old. The proles will go on living in hovels and foul-smelling apartments. In that place everything began not with building, not with transforming bad things into better, but with destruction, not with love but with grandiosity and vengeance. It'll be in vain that the splendid commissars will cover the smell of murder with the perfume of progress."

When his son would appear in the entrance to the den under the stairs, Seweryn Baryka would stretch out his trembling hands to him and ask always the same question: Is there no train? This was no longer a dream, nor even a yearning to return to his homeland, but some madness of the soul. I want to leave!—was the only exclamation ever heard from this man. One had the impression that if he had been allowed to get on a train

The Coming Spring

and travel to Poland, the fever that made him shiver or burn would instantly have abated, and he would most surely have recovered his health. How could his son have left him? How could he have sent him off to an eternal separation? He put his arms round his father and shared his longing for the moment of departure. And in this way, within him there grew as it were a cancer of the feelings, pulsating with contradictory passions. Cezary was both here and there, in Russia and in Poland; he was both with his father and against him. He thrashed and struggled inside, unable to prevail over himself.

For it was not only differences of opinion on public and social matters that divided (and at the same time, in a curious way connected) father and son. In his soul Cezary was still fighting to overcome this old man, ridding himself of his moral influence, growing away from him and separating his exuberant strength from the decaying trunk it had sprung from. Just as in his childhood, he was still hampered by bonds that curbed his will. He had to yield a thousand times over because he was the son; while his old father could give orders, proscribe, and even be simply capricious for the sole reason that he *was* the father and had the unwritten power of prohibiting the most righteous matters and feelings. Cezary did nothing that could be regarded as moral parricide, but he strained at his fetters. Oftentimes he was seized by an inner rage and he swallowed hard words. But the very swallowing itself was torture, for it bore the taste of a resentment faint and indistinct, yet also sharp and unyielding. Oftentimes, in his innermost depths Cezary resented the fact that this enigmatic man, driven as he

was by his undying love, had sought him out in Baku, found him, caught him in his net of emotions and taken him away from there. Otherwise he would have remained "Barolak"; he would have remained himself. He would have been his own master and followed the road he himself chose. He would have completed his grave-digging work, cast down his shovel and joined the ranks of those creating new things. Now he was being led on the tether of his love for his father in the direction of a Poland he neither knew nor desired. His father had imposed upon him an ideal that was alien to his soul and incomprehensible, unwanted and hard, mawkish and drab. In truth, what was unbearable for him was not the ideal itself but the fact that he was obliged to tolerate it compliantly and to nurture it. And in the meantime Seweryn Baryka's egotism in imposing this ideal did not diminish but on the contrary, grew. Cezary's father did not impose upon his son his nostalgia or his desire to return, but he trembled and moaned as Cezary's mother once had. Could Cezary himself possibly have withheld his assistance in the effort to return?

*

And so Cezary checked in every day at the Polish office, sounded out the clerks, and gathered information in the city. At last he heard the longed-for news. A train was to come! It was a huge *eshelon* transporting a large number of Poles back to their country. Alas, it had been indicated far in advance that the train was full and that no one from Kharkov could be taken. Cezary pulled

The Coming Spring

every string in order to secure two places on that train; he was vigilant day and night. Naturally no one had any idea when it would arrive. It was supposed to stop only very briefly in Kharkov, perhaps only for a few minutes, precisely in order to prevent those waiting from cramming onto it. The escort leading the repatriatees, who had to answer strictly to the Soviet authorities for any contravention of the regulations, had let it be known ahead of time, before the train arrived, that he would not accept any new passengers. Cezary did not lose hope and kept watch in person or with the help of a series of well-wishers who in that sea of pitilessness had nevertheless taken pity on his father.

One evening the signal came: the train! Seweryn and Cezary rushed to the station. Here supposedly nothing was known about a train, but the secret sources of information had conveyed signs to indicate: it's coming!

Both Barykas listened intently. The older man was so agitated, on edge, and enervated that he could barely stand on his own two feet. It looked as if he were about to drop to the ground and listen from there. Then, in the silence of the night, from far off there came a dull rumbling, the harbinger so yearned for. The two of them stood straining their ears in the gloomy, dimly lit, deserted station. The rumbling drew closer and louder. In the distance there flashed the moving lights of lanterns. At last the train, huge and dark, crept into the station and came to a stop. It comprised a series of cars with frost-covered windows and doors. Hoary icicles hung like shaggy, matted hair from this chain of moving

houses shut tight, barred and locked. When Cezary jumped forward and tried to open the first, second, third, fourth, tenth door, it was in vain that he strained his fingers and wrenched his hands. Every door was impregnable.

A man had emerged from one of the last cars and was quickly walking toward the station in search of someone in authority. The two travelers hurried up to him and without asking who he was, barraged him with requests to let them onto the train. As it turned out, this was the escort, Engineer Białynia. Seweryn had known him long ago from his years in business. He set about reminding him of the old days and begging him to have mercy, to take pity, to help, to find them a place. The other man remembered Baryka—of course, dear Mr. Seweryn, Symbirsk, the good old days!—but there was nothing he could do. Nothing! He would pay with his head, literally his head, if he took any new people onto the train! It was already overloaded, filled to bursting. At virtually every stop the inspectors were checking the papers of those entitled to travel in this *eshelon*. Smuggling even one additional passenger meant capital punishment!

“I can’t! I’m sorry, I’m truly sorry, dear Mr. Seweryn...I can’t! Especially two people! I can’t!” the conductor lamented.

He advised them to wait for the next *eshelon*, which was supposed to pass through on such and such a date, under the supervision of such and such an escort. Perhaps this second one would have fewer people and they would find room on it. Seweryn Baryka stooped to the

lowest pleas. He begged. He implored. He beseeched. He kissed Engineer Białynia's hands. He wept the ghastly tears of an old man...All to no avail. It did no good. His pleas and arguments were in vain. Białynia explained in a whisper that it would be better for them to wait, to wait a while for the next train, than to condemn him, Białynia, his countryman and old acquaintance—friend even!—to lose his life. And it was with his life—his life!—that he would have to answer. And so on. Cezary paid no heed to these persuasions. In harsh and blunt words he declared that his father could not wait any longer—that they had been living there for weeks like troglodytes, waiting only for an opportunity to leave—and now that this opportunity was here, they were being told to wait! How could they wait! For what? To be turned away once again? Why should others be allowed to go while for them it was utterly impossible? Białynia began to explain once again that it was not just the two of them but the others from Kharkov too. Hundreds and hundreds had made their request, and he had refused because...

From behind, the disputants had been joined by another man, a passenger traveling on that very train. He was listening to their conversation in silence. When Białynia once again refused, even more determinedly and categorically, precisely because of the blunt expostulations of the young Baryka—the newcomer tugged Seweryn by the sleeve and pushed him toward the end of the train. He himself said to Engineer Białynia:

“Death? Death for taking these two?”

"Death!" exclaimed the engineer.

"Well, maybe it would be death—everything is possible. But take them we must."

"I am not taking them!" cried Białynia loudly. "I'm not taking them! I'm not!"

"Then you're not taking them, I am. You can blame me. If they're found out you can put the blame on me. You know nothing about it, it's the first you've heard of it—'*znat' ne znayu, vedat' ne vedayu*'²⁷—I took them secretly, unbeknownst to you. It'll be on my head—that's the deal."

Białynia fumed as he stood there, stamping his feet and squeaking his irrefutable arguments, but the other man—a tall, skinny, dark-haired fellow with a stoop—hurried the Barykas ahead of him. He told them to crawl under the wagons to the other side of the train, and followed them on all fours. Then the three of them ran furtively as fast as their legs would carry them all the way to the end of the interminable series of waiting cars. When they came to the last one the dark-haired man clambered up onto a step suspended far off the ground, with considerable difficulty drew back a bolt and opened a sliding door, which creaked malignantly in the frost. He called the two of them with an impatient command:

"Crawl right underneath. Under the sheepskins! Lie here quietly—don't make the slightest sound! Get a move on!"

²⁷ A Russian expression meaning roughly, "I don't know anything about it."

The Coming Spring

Father and son pushed their way into a pile of stinking sheepskins and quickly lay down. The dark-haired fellow shut the door, bolted it and jumped down. Soon after, the train gave a violent jerk. The buffers started to clank together, and the wheels turned on the tracks with a squeal. Seweryn Baryka pressed his son's hand to his heart:

"We're on our way!" he whispered.

"We're on our way..."

*

The tall dark-haired man did not forget about the two people that by his good graces had been locked in a freight car full of sheepskins. During the very first stop, when the train came to a halt for some time, he brought them a kettle of hot water, a little sugar wrapped in a scrap of newspaper, a hunk of bread, and also a cup of boiled kasha. They ate in silence, and the elder Baryka was overcome with emotion. He talked mystically of some hand that had impelled this tall thin countryman of theirs to assist them. Indeed, whatever else might be said, the dark-haired man appeared every so often with the kettle and a mug that always contained some kind of nourishment. He enjoined them in a whisper to remain well hidden, since an inspection could take place without warning. At times the train would stop in the middle of nowhere, among the snowdrifts, and the dance of the inspectors would commence. They would check papers and property, and any kind of gold, rings, wedding bands, not to mention watches—all was subject to con-

fiscation. Rice, and even barley, was looked upon with equal disapproval.

Father and son buried themselves beneath the sheepskins, the more so because a bitter cold persisted. Cezary caught up on his sleep after keeping watch in Kharkov. Seweryn found the smell of the sheepskins hard to put up with. The sick man could not suppress a devilish cough, which incidentally could have been their downfall. And so at stations and chance stops, at moments when an inspection could be anticipated, he would thrust his head among the skins and literally choke so as not to cough. He had had a fever when they left Kharkov, and in the closed, airless wagon, amid the stench of the poorly treated skins, his condition grew worse and worse. As if out of spite, the train was continually stopping and remaining in place so the driver could carry out the usual repairs on the locomotive. Cezary was in despair, because there was nothing he could do about this state of affairs. Every time the tireless and mysterious Samaritan appeared with his cup and kettle, and was asked for advice and assistance, he would place his finger on his lips, listen anxiously, and tell them to be quiet and to remain patient and cautious.

One day he appeared in the company of another, older individual. They both climbed up into the car. The older man squatted, or rather lay down, next to Seweryn, unfastened his clothing and set about examining his lungs through a stethoscope. All at once, however, he broke off his examination and put the stethoscope in his pocket. Both Samaritans wore sorrowful expressions. Cezary's heart trembled with fear and a terrible, power-

The Coming Spring

less anguish. What was he supposed to do? What was the right course of action? How could he save his father? Was he supposed to leave the car and walk along, bearing him in his arms? He asked the other two men, his worthy fellow-travelers, but they were unable to answer his questions. The dark-haired man ran back after the physician had left and brought some sort of pungent, bitter drink in a glass. He hugged the young man, who was tormented in his helplessness. When the door closed behind him and they were alone again, Cezary put his arms round his father, lay down by him, embraced him, and imagined that in this way he was pouring his health into him, transferring his pulsing blood into his father's desiccated veins and driving out his mysterious infirmity. Seweryn was on fire. His head thrashed about on the curly wool of the sheepskins. He kept moaning in a whisper:

"Don't let's stay behind here! Let's travel on! Don't drag me outside onto the ground! We'll make it there! It won't be long now! We're more than half way there!"

He would fall asleep and then wake suddenly with a cry that his son stifled with kisses. Cezary uttered a thousand comforts and incantations of hope into his father's burning mouth. At one moment Seweryn rose up as if he had suddenly had an access of strength. He put his arms around Cezary and said directly into his ear:

"Do you remember? That was how we used to learn poems in French. Do you remember, Czarus? If I don't make it...If I have to stay here...don't you stay here too! Don't stay! Go there! Take a look for yourself...You'll

see...I didn't know anything, I didn't understand a thing. It was only when I crossed that land on foot with the legions that I grasped it all...Before that I understood nothing, just like you now. And now look what's happening to me. It's a terrible fate..."

He fell asleep for a long while, then spoke again:

"In Warsaw go and find a man called Szymon Gajowiec. He's well known there. Ask around. Tell him about us. He was a friend of mama's and of mine. He'll look after you, he'll tell you all you need to know. His name is Szymon Gajowiec..."

He collapsed back and fell asleep. But his sleep was restless, filled with groans and sobs. Cezary sat by his father as the latter was plunged in his death throes; unable to do anything to help, it was as if he too were dying. The train hurtled across desolate spaces as though it were headed for the land of death. The wretched son put his hands under his father's head as he slept, so as to bring him relief in his suffering. Overcome by the torment of his soul, he unwittingly fell asleep. He thought he had not even closed his eyes, but in fact he slept for some time. When he awoke he no longer heard any coughing, wheezing, or groans from his father's chest. As he pressed his ear hurriedly to the breast that a moment ago had been gasping, he no longer detected heart-beat or breath. For a long time his head drooped helplessly over the terrible wilderness that had opened up before it. For a long time there continued the appalling shock that lips which a moment ago had been speaking, were now turned to stone and were indifferent to anything that might take place, indifferent till the very end

The Coming Spring

of the world. Cezary had no idea how long he rode across the snow-covered fields and ice-bound waters, through woods and fallow ground as empty and mute as his father's breast. He could not bring himself to remove his hands from beneath the motionless head, as if the ice had fixed them there and the frost had hardened them with its power. He longed to fall asleep in the same way, so as never to abandon this pilgrim who himself had had to abandon his own distant destination. He was unable to cry, nor moan, nor howl, nor call out to the heavens, though he had both cry and moan and dull howling within him.

Eventually, after a longer or shorter numbness in pain, he heard the door sliding open with a rasp and felt icy air entering the interior. It was the dark-haired man, once again bringing something to eat. He bent over Seweryn Baryka and for a while held his hand to the latter's heart. He pulled Cezary to his feet and in a rough shout told him to get out of his hiding place. The young man hurriedly jumped down. The cold swept over him. The other man grabbed the first sheepskin to hand and threw it round Cezary's shoulders, then closed the door and ordered Cezary to follow him. They entered a compartment so overcrowded with men, women and children that the air was as foul as in the car with the sheepskins. Cezary's nameless friend spoke to the people there in a vehement and impassioned whisper. They shuffled aside a little to make room, and Cezary found a free place on the bench. A stream of water trickled down the ice-covered window. A draught blew through the compartment. Many pairs of eyes studied the newcomer

curiously. Amid this crowd of haggard, sleepless, underfed wretches, these bedraggled women, filthy children and glaring men, he felt a hundred times worse than in his solitude. He tried to leave. With his eyes he begged the dark-haired man to let him rejoin his father. But the other man, still circulating among the crowd, would not let him. He ordered him to wait. So Cezary waited. The train shook, its wheels clattering against the rails, and rocked as it prepared to set off.

Toward the evening of that day it made a lengthy stop. A new inspection team passed through the wagons. The soldiers poked at belongings and scrutinized pots and bowls containing provisions. Word circulated anxiously about how rough they were being. When they were about to enter the compartment where Cezary was sitting, he was led out to the neighboring compartment and from there down the steps to the brake van, where the brakeman pushed him behind himself and hid him under his immense sheepskin coat. After some time, at a nod from his companions in the compartment, Cezary had to re-emerge and return to his seat.

Since the train remained where it was—an extensive *remontik* was brewing—Cezary's nameless friend called him outside. Two strangers stood at the end of the train. The orphaned young man went up to them and saw that they were lifting his father's body out of the car. They wrapped it in a canvas sheet. Before they did so, they allowed him to close the eyelids over those extinguished eyes, and to press his lips to the cold hands and the cold mouth. Then they laid the remains on a bier in preparation for taking it away. Cezary raised his pleading eyes to

The Coming Spring

his dark-haired friend to be allowed to accompany his father. It was then he noticed that the other man was wearing a white shirt beneath his unbuttoned cloak. As if in his sleep he heard words in Latin: *Dies illa, dies irae...*²⁸

He realized with disillusionment and disgust that the dark-haired man was a priest. The latter made the sign of the cross over the body, bent over it and prayed a while. Then he signaled to the pall-bearers. He turned to Cezary with a brusque question:

“Are you staying?”

“Where are they taking my father?”

The priest pointed to a small town that could be made out through the dusk, and to the spire of a church on its far side. He said quietly:

“He’ll be buried by that church. He’ll be better off there than here in the ditch.”

“I’m going with them!”

“So you’re staying?”

Cezary wrung his hands. He did not know if he was staying.

“The train’s about to leave. Are you staying?”

“I’m going with them!”

But the other man put a firm arm round his shoulders and dragged him toward the train. He was saying something to him. Cezary was plunged in despair and did not understand. He looked round one more time and in the gathering darkness made out two people carrying a hu-

²⁸ “This day, day of wrath” (Latin), from a Catholic funeral hymn.

man form on a stretcher. A moment later he was on his way again.

*

The train crept along for a long time; it was packed with people, though time and again passengers were left behind in the cemeteries of small towns along the way. The closer it drew to the Polish borderlands, the more frequent and severe were the inspections. At long last the joyful news spread among the travelers: the border! Yet before these people, unfed and tormented for so long in their cars, were able to see the frontier buildings they so longed for, they were mistreated for a good while longer. The train stood in the middle of nowhere. The doors were locked. Those confined in this moving prison waited for the implacable authorities to take pity on them.

Cezary noticed an interesting thing—that all these people, his neighbors from the seats nearby, who were far from being factory owners, bankers, or magnates, but rather were ordinary, kind-hearted “eaters of bread” as well as of porridge which they paid for with the sweat of their brow—all these small businessmen and impoverished professionals, clerks and workers from private companies, then, were deprived of any rights precisely in the country where he had heard so much about the entitlements of all those who have been oppressed and deprived of their rights. He was driven to fury by the tyranny of the lowliest militiaman or rank and file soldier, who for no apparent reason bullied the Polish emigrants

The Coming Spring

with relish, with an insatiable pleasure, in a naked outpouring of vulgar nationalistic vindictiveness. One could understand their anger at the bourgeoisie, at their countrymen fleeing Russia via Baku for the outside world, but this coarse and heartless violence towards guests, strangers, travelers who were simply returning home—this amazed and angered him. He gazed at the faces of the commanding officers, at the soldiers conducting the searches and those guarding the doors, and for the first time in his life he saw not just with his eyes but with his feeling soul the tyranny about which his father had spoken to him so often.

But after all the anguish and the most abominable anxieties, especially of the women—that they would not let them out, that they would send them back, that they would lock the doors, turn the train around with all its passengers and send them all back to Kharkov—after innumerable rumors and unlikely tales borne of fear and blown up to unprecedented dimensions by human foolishness—in the end the doors of the cars were opened. The people gathered what they still had with them, carrying their children and dragging out the weak and the sick. They rushed forward shouting and sobbing, jostling and pushing in front, along a muddy highway toward some houses that could be seen nearby. Running ever faster as if they were being chased, praying, crying and laughing at the same time, they descended on a gate beyond which there stood a group of soldiers in battered gray four-cornered Polish caps. The weak old women grasped the crossbar of the gate with trembling hands, while the exhausted men kissed its posts. Everyone was elbowing one

another and hustling, forcing a path for themselves and their family through the throng that was surging like a mass of drowning swimmers reaching the shore. The gate was open and they were let through one by one.

At last Cezary's turn came. He had no papers, since all his documents had been in the stolen suitcase. He was simply moving forward. He may have been the only person in the whole crowd who was greeting no one, but rather bidding farewell and leaving everything behind him. At the last moment, when he was just about to pass through the gate, Engineer Białynia thrust into his hand some paper, someone's identity card. The Polish officer took the paper from Baryka, looked it over and stamped it right there on a small table. Cezary passed through the gate. He had entered Poland, the land of his parents.

The mass of people passed the station buildings and headed toward the little town, whose stone- and wood-built houses could be seen in the near distance. Cezary went with them. After the discomforts of the train, the crush and the lack of air in the compartments, he could now breathe easily in the broadness and vastness of the open air. He stretched out his hands to that broad air, and to the unknown earth, as if taking possession of his freedom. He passed unsightly buildings constructed haphazardly of the cheapest materials and covered with tarpaper that had been ripped by the wind and pitted with holes by the harsh winter rains. Wishing to take in the whole *op-pidum*²⁹ at a glance, he walked on past the last house.

²⁹ Town (Latin).

The Coming Spring

A river flowed there, winding across the lowlands between steep banks. The snow was already melting and the first sparse, pale green fresh grass was beginning to grow by the racing waters. On this barely detectable greenery a group of beggarly children were dancing barefoot to the sounds of a mouth organ. Their naked feet skipped across the mud, which they had managed to flatten into a usable dance floor. The coming spring had already blown the ice and snow from the roofs of the nearby cottages, and with the natural breath of the south it had warmed the interiors that the long and harsh winter, enemy of the poor, had filled with a deathly spirit. Collapsing gutters, holes in the roofs, and moldy walls were now being mantled by that eternal artist, the new spring, with gold and silver, green and gray, its own colors with which it coats the world. It was attempting to use those faint hues to conceal the loathsome sight that humans had laid out against its eternally beautiful backdrop: a small Polish and Jewish town. Cezary gazed with cheerless eyes at the miry streets pocked with bottomless potholes; at the houses of all different heights, shapes, colors, and degrees of outward filthiness; at the pigsties and puddles, the outbuildings and the charred ruins. He returned to the market square set about with Jewish stores, their doors and windows bespattered with months of mud, and unwashed for the longest time before that.

“Where on earth are your houses of glass?” he wondered as he plodded on. “Where on earth are your houses of glass...?”

PART TWO

Nawłóć

Arriving at the very heart of Poland—in other words Warsaw, its capital—Cezary Baryka had found no houses of glass either in the city or on the way. He didn't even dare ask anyone about them. He realized that before his death his late father had played a painful joke on him. Nevertheless—influenced perhaps by that so naive legend, or perhaps by its hero, “cousin Baryka”—Cezary decided to study medicine in Warsaw. He did not have his papers from Baku, but after a rather superficial examination he was admitted and began to attend lectures. With great enthusiasm he cut up stiffs and studied osteology, chemistry, botany and so on. He got to know some of “the Poles” and took quite a liking to these new people, though they sometimes cut him to the quick with their “insincerity.”

As concerned material things he was much helped by his late father's acquaintance Mr. Szymon Gajowiec, a high-ranking official in the newly created Ministry of the Treasury, who gave him a temporary job in his office and arranged well-paying Russian

The Coming Spring

lessons for senior army officers from "Galicia."¹ This Mr. Gajowiec asked particularly about Cezary's mother, whom he had known long long ago in the town of Siedlce. He had Cezary repeat every detail many times over, along with the story of all the vicissitudes she had suffered, and her death.

Cezary told everything with especial thoroughness to this unknown man, while the latter listened to it all intently—more, with tears in his eyes, and once even, during an account of the last days of her torments, he wept bitterly. Cezary could not figure out the reason for this—why this gentleman, who had not seen his mother for so many years, since she had left the country, was so concerned with her fate and so moved by it. But Mr. Gajowiec, a stiff and distinguished bureaucrat, confirmed bachelor, pedant, and stickler for discipline, explained it to him himself one day as they were talking one on one. He confessed in a calm and dispassionate manner, as if he were speaking of a financial matter, without a trace of affectation, or of false shame or false sentimentality, that long ago he had loved Cezary's mother. He had loved her alone in all his life. At the time he had been a poor young pen-pusher in the treasury office of the provincial government, and he could not compete with Cezary's father, who arrived out of the blue from Russia, swathed in a cloud of success. She was given away to the best

¹ Galicia was the southeastern region of the new Polish republic; it had formerly been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and so its inhabitants often did not know Russian.

suitor—there was nothing odd about that...Who, what parents, could have rejected such a match? She left as a young lady, and now her name was all that was left of her. Mr. Gajowiec assured Cezary baldly that he had never so much as shaken her hand, that he had never expressed his feelings to her in words. Once...there had been a letter...but it was irrelevant and had had no influence on her decision.

And so there was nothing wrong with the fact that he was now speaking to her son about this, since she herself was gone. Even his rival—God have mercy!—was gone. He alone, Cezary, was left, the shadow and likeness of “Miss Jadwiga”; his eyes were the very image of his mother’s. Mr. Gajowiec was glad to talk with Cezary. They often secreted themselves alone together and spent hours recalling Cezary’s late mother. There was not a detail, a variant of a story, or an anecdote concerning her that did not interest the older man. There was not one topic connected with her that would have bored him. Cezary too found a particular pleasure in these conversations about his mother. It sometimes seemed to him that just like Mr. Gajowiec, he saw her young, beautiful, and happy, that he was getting to know her as Miss Jadwiga, Miss Jadzia, with whom a certain stripling from a government office was madly, insanely in love, and kept telling her so with his dreamy eyes. This was a new image of his mother, a new form she was assuming, a new transformation of that pain-ridden old woman who had attended to his needs as she leant on her walking stick. And so both he and Mr. Gajowiec fell in love all over again with the specter of Miss Jadwiga.

The Coming Spring

Neither this acquaintance, nor his new life, nor his studies at the university lasted long. War with the Bolsheviks broke out.² Cezary volunteered for the army, like all his classmates in medical school. He was not burning with enthusiasm for soldiering, nor did he have any intellectual or ideological desire to fight the Soviets, but he had to join up out of fear of disgrace. This military pride was stronger than his convictions or his fondness for the other side. Mr. Gajowiec, now his only quasi-guardian and spiritual father, did not hold him back or try to dissuade him, even though the departure of his young friend was a sore loss for him. They decided the matter in the course of a few seconds. Cezary left “for the field.” This “field” was close by, just outside Warsaw.³ It could almost be seen, since the smoke from the fires in Radzymin came drifting into view from the high ridge on which Warsaw was perched. The crash of artillery fire that Cezary knew so well could also be heard. Thus, once again that accursed sound had come to interrupt his solitude and the work he had just begun! All that had taken place in Baku was commencing again! Yet here there appeared new, different elements that turned out to play a deciding role.

One time, when the Bolshevik forces had already passed the burned-out towns and had almost reached the suburbs of Warsaw, and the whole city was moving,

² The Polish–Soviet War began in February 1919 and escalated in early 1920. Hostilities ceased in October 1920 and a peace was signed in March 1921.

³ The fighting around Warsaw took place in August 1920.

running, jumping, everyone flying every which way—when the entire place thundered like a drum from the trucks and the artillery rumbling through, and echoed from the stomping of troops marching this way and that—after his drill, Cezary went into a garden café to have a glass of soda water. There were no free tables. They were all occupied by gentlemen and ladies, predominantly of Semitic origin. This was the plutocracy of the city of Warsaw, which had not followed the lead of the rudest of their kind, and had not taken to their heels and made a run for it, but had remained where they were. These gentlemen were no longer merely whispering about what was going on. They were speaking loudly, perhaps even a little too loudly—shouting in fact. They were arguing—only amongst themselves—about how they would behave when these as yet unknown Bolsheviks entered the city. Some of the gentlemen anticipated that everything would be fine, that things would fall into place and that the situation would be manageable. Worse things were manageable, and this matter would be too. Why shouldn't it be? They reminded one another of the excellent saying of some wise fellow, to the effect that an ass laden with gold will enter the most inaccessible fortress. Others expressed the concern that there would be unpleasantness and rough treatment.

“They're barbarians!” exclaimed one of the gentlemen, a portly individual in expensive cord, as he toyed with the fob of his watch chain where it lay on his stomach. “They're scoundrels!” he added looking around, not without the hope that the local Sarmatians, louse-ridden and infirm, who were wandering here and

The Coming Spring

there amid the consumptive chestnut trees, should hear his exclamations at such a moment—at such a moment!

His antagonist objected. Mildly, phlegmatically. He said that his interlocutor was “nothing but a skeptic.” He asserted that such notions were an exaggeration, gossip, even slander. The dispute, theoretical in essence, grew heated. The gentlemen argued loudly, as if they had been at home. It even seemed they were on the point of insulting one another or coming to blows. Yet in the end everything concluded peaceably.

They agreed on one thing:

“We shall see...”

“We shall see! Today or tomorrow we’ll see. I hope you won’t have to experience on your own skin exactly what their good intentions are.”

“Thank you for that wish. I’m sure it’ll be granted. Everything’ll be fine.”

“You’re an incorrigible optimist!”

“I’m a man who keeps his eyes open and understands what’s going on around him.”

“I only hope you won’t have to cover your eyes!”

“We already said that we’ll see...”

“Very well—we’ll see!”

Cezary did not finish his drink. The war between Poland and Soviet Russia, the goal of which was to reduce the territory over which the peasants and workers already had control, was not something he desired. For his task involved trying to diminish or even put an end to the victory that the workers had already achieved. He wavered in himself, thinking he was betraying the workers’ cause. But what he heard in the café struck him like

a slap in the face. He had no wish to be a spectator of the ilk of those gentlemen. At that very moment he told himself he would not wait for things to happen by chance. No! He would not permit those two men to “see” everything happen the way they predicted!

The second motor that propelled him was the enthusiasm that was everywhere. Everyone, just everyone was joining the army. It was as if it were a grand ball or a day trip to the country. He had never seen anything in his life like the enthusiasm of the Poles.

One day, on the ruined iron bridge over the Vistula he heard the workers and their political leaders⁴ making speeches in which they appealed for a life-and-death struggle, but not with the bourgeoisie, as was always the case in workers’ speeches, but with the invader, who was coming to pillage and bring destruction along with his red banners. He had seen underage boys breaking free from their mothers’ grip, and had read accounts in the newspaper of how they had died heroic deaths. He wanted to see with his own eyes this cause for which all the men and youths were going to the field to risk their necks—were going calmly, cheerfully, amid the beating of drums. He wanted to see what really lay at the heart of their enthusiasm, what fundamental ideal, what power, what inwardly coiled spring was unwinding and impelling them to this deed. And also what that power was worth.

*

⁴ This refers to leaders of the PPS, the Polska Partia Socjalistyczna or Polish Socialist Party.

The Coming Spring

When, for the first time after his rather lengthy training on the parade ground, he finally set off, crossing the bridge over the Vistula, passing through the Praga neighborhood and finding himself with his company at the edge of the suburbs, the officer in command of his unit—a young martial satrap who seemed to have swallowed a hundred generals—ordered a halt. On the Radzymin road, which at this point ran out into open fields, there was a vast pall of dust, a yellow cloud that rose high into the sky. There was no way of knowing what was concealed beneath such a vast shroud.

The young soldiers stood with ground arms. Behind them there was a group made up of injured civilians, trucks, peasant carts—all brought to a standstill and compressed into a single mass. Finally they saw that in the great dust cloud there was some center, a dark core. In a short time the mysterious core revealed itself. It was an immense, endless column of Bolshevik prisoners of war. In thick, heavy greatcoats that stretched to the ground, with fur caps on their perspiring heads, mostly barefoot or wearing footwear of the most varied provenance, these young conquerors of the world plodded along in the custody of small, underaged Polish soldiers with rifles on their shoulders who appeared at intervals and shouted sternly at the unending horde marching in shackled sixes along the Radzymin highway. The sight was so astonishing that all those watching fell silent and stared and stared in utter amazement. The weary prisoners kept coming and coming, passing the small unit that included Cezary Baryka.

All at once, from the last house by the roadside, a low habitation painted a furious light blue and containing a little inn that was the final consolation for those leaving the city and the first harbinger of the great capital for those arriving by that road—from this habitation, then, there emerged a short and rotund individual of the female gender, fat as a barrel. She stared for a long while at the passing ranks of Bolshevik soldiers, till she could restrain herself no longer: she placed her arms akimbo, waddled up to the line of prisoners and started waving her fist at them. As if she were possessed by the devil, she strode to and fro, shouting:

“So you’d come and conquer Warsaw, the lot of you, you stinking Muscovites...? We’ve not seen you here for a long while, you sons of bitches! I see you’ve already beaten our lads? So you’re off to hunker down in the throne room of the royal palace...?”

The prisoners of war gazed at this undersized witch gravely and not without fear in their eyes. They had no idea what the monster was urging the soldiers with grounded arms to do. Maybe to massacre them? The old crone stomped about by the column, screaming louder and louder:

“Look at those Siberian mugs, gentlemen! Look at those fine top hats they’ve got on—a bit too warm for this weather! Quite the men about town! Not to mention that classy footwear of theirs! Look at them staring at us with their little peepers! And those honest-looking faces! First rate fellows. And it’s all from hunger, my good gentlemen.”

The Coming Spring

She marched up and down alongside the column like a general headed towards Radzymin; she inspected the troops and began shouting again:

“You’d eat the buttons off each other’s pants if you had any, but you don’t, you slant-eyed Kalmuks! You’re not even civilized enough to wear proper trousers. You’re starving hungry because you’ve not had a bite of food for four days. Well it serves you right, you bastards! Keep your snouts out of other people’s business, you pigs! Do you understand me, all of you?”

The last inquiry she shrieked out the loudest, as if she expected a reply. And when none came, but the ranks marched on one after another, she explained the secret of her dire question:

“If I had a few baskets of potatoes, which I don’t, I’d boil them up in their skins and feed them to you in a trough, you starving hogs! I can’t bear to look at those hungry snouts, gentlemen. I really can’t!”

And indeed this lady of the outskirts stepped back a little, also because the dust kicked up by the captives had covered everything. The head of the column was probably already crossing the bridge over the Vistula, while its tail had not yet entered the Praga suburb. At last they passed by. The dust settled. Cezary Baryka’s unit moved off. Evening was coming. A dark and cloudy night was descending on the highway as they passed the last barb wire fortifications and rows of trenches along the fringes of the woods. Broad muddy river bottoms extended here on either side of the road, blocking the enemy’s access to the capital. But the enemy was nowhere to be found. All that could be seen on either side of the

trampled road were dark pits, each with a canopy pointed in the direction of Warsaw. These were the furthestmost outposts of Moscow, set out in parallel symmetrical lines in the earth of central Poland.

On its march the unit kept passing cavalry and infantry, heavy vehicles towing military equipment, endless wagons of the supply column, and carts taking the wounded back to the city. Night had fallen by the time the unit reached Radzymin, a small town with still-smoldering rubble and houses riddled by artillery shells. Desolation and silence hung over back streets and alleyways that seemed to have been excised from existence. The unit halted here for a short while in front of a two-story building that had survived intact. Cezary looked around this theater of war. The tedium of destruction blew here through the smoke and embers. A cheerless night settled over the odious sight. From the gateway of the two-story building there emerged a French officer,⁵ an older man with a graying goatee and walrus moustache. His face was stern and anxious, and bespoke an indescribable exhaustion.

The officer clambered into the sidecar of a motorcycle and gave an imperious signal to the Polish soldier serving as the chauffeur of the vehicle. The motorcycle emitted a series of loud explosions, turned about and raced off northwards down the road toward Wyszaków.

⁵ A French military mission assisted the Polish command during the Red Army's attack on Poland.

The Coming Spring

“Look at that, pals!” someone from the unit muttered under his breath. “That sick old Frenchie and his driver are off to take on the whole Bolshevik army.”

“He knows full well he’ll never catch them. They’ll turn tail and run at the sight of him!”

“Silence in the ranks!” the commanding officer, a twenty-two-year-old lieutenant, roared in a fearful bass voice.

A moment later the small column set off at a brisk pace in absolute darkness alleviated only faintly by the glowing ruins of Radzymin. They were marching towards the enemy, not knowing in fact whether he actually would turn tail, or would strike at Warsaw once again.

*

Cezary Baryka walked endless miles in that Polish war. Along with his comrades in the unit he completed furious marches and sallies, about-turns and ambushes; sometimes they had to scarper in the face of superior force. It happened that he entered right amongst the enemy, participating in General Sikorski’s bravura undertaking that ripped open the Bolshevik front like a dagger thrust.⁶ It happened that he would march for days and nights, onward, eastward, in pursuit of the fleeing enemy. Countless villages and towns, forests and fields passed before his eyes. He waded across broad overflowing rivers amongst waterlogged meadows. His fa-

⁶ As part of the Polish counter-offensive, General Władysław Sikorski led an attack that split the Soviet forces in two.

ther's houses of glass were absolutely nowhere to be seen. He gradually stopped thinking about them. Nor did he think about the ideology of the invaders from the east. It could not be perceived amid the ruins, the destruction, the trampling, and the signs of pillaging, slaughter, and rape.

The mortal enemy of the poor went before him along any available road to the east, destroying and looting. Where there had been iron bridges, their shattered skeletons remained; where wooden bridges used to be, charred stumps were all that was left. Where villages had stood, there were devastated, empty places. Where anything of beauty had been left from the past for future generations of this impoverished land, a heap of rubble was to be seen. How could one read in this script of the eastern invaders the ideals proclaimed by the speakers at the mass meetings? Furthermore war itself, as a mass undertaking, as a new and unfamiliar art, intrigued him, or rather overwhelmed him. Baryka no longer thought now about what he was fighting for or against whom, where he was and where he was headed. Wherever and whenever he was ordered to he marched, camped, ate, slept, jumped to his feet, did sentry duty, or crept up stealthily to the enemy pickets.

The former sportsman of Baku mostly acquitted himself well. His superiors praised him, and his brothers in arms learned to count on Baryka as once they had counted on Zawisza the Black.⁷ Cezary had

⁷ A famous Polish knight of the 15th century.

The Coming Spring

no one to go home to, nor to write letters to. Occasionally he sent cards to Mr. Gajowiec. He received cordial replies—and that was his whole world. But on these marches and in the bivouacs in ditches and dug-outs, alongside him there were human spirits—his comrades. It turned out that these “Polaks” could even be fellow spirits. Each of them had some “Mama” or some “Papa” somewhere. Some even had grandmothers; and when the company halted almost every one of them, when he thought no one was watching, would slobber over a photograph of his darling Kazia or Zosia. Cezary didn’t have a single Zosia, and so he gazed with lofty cynicism and mockery not just at the names and diminutives themselves, but in general at the sentiments they expressed. As for him, he was every inch the soldier. There was nothing aside from this. Forward march!—and that was all. In the company he became especial friends with a certain young man by the name of Hipolit Wielosławski, also a student at Warsaw University and presently a fine example of a soldier. During a certain episode in the vicinity of Łysów near Łosice Cezary saved this Wielosławski from a tight spot. In a skirmish Wielosławski had fallen into the hands of the Bolsheviks; he had been bayoneted, beaten with rifle butts, and abandoned in the Rogacz woods. Not finding him in the company, Cezary had returned hot-foot to the woods, found his comrade, picked him up and brought him back amongst his own.

Wielosławski soon healed up, but he did not forget what had been done for him. He never spoke of his

background, his family, or his feelings. In the ranks he was "Hipolit" and that was that. But there were rumors that he had noble blood, that he was a big-time aristocrat, and cousin to some even higher-born Wielosławskis. Hipolit was a proper, first-rate soldier. He wore out his boots chasing after the red villains, chewed his coarse black bread and knocked back his vodka; he slept on the ground and sweated as they about-faced, as if he didn't have an ounce of blue blood in his veins. And he had the strength of a horse; he could manage a full day's march without food, when even the old troopers were fit to drop. Many a time he and Cezary shared a single blanket and shared their bread, lard, salt, and bedbugs like brothers. And so they grew to be close friends and bosom pals.

Autumn was coming when the joyful news spread through the ranks that the enemy had left the country and an armistice was close. The unit in which the two friends were serving was withdrawn from Belorussia to the Mazowsze region, and Baryka and Wielosławski found themselves in the small town of Żeromin. Both soldiers embarked upon a lengthy sleep that would have sufficed for ten average neurasthenics. But comestibles were scarce in the town, and so the weary knights grew fearfully bored there.

University students were discharged more readily than others, and so Baryka and Wielosławski were released from the ranks as soon as defensive operations were completed. The latter invited Baryka to come and rest up at a place called Nawłóć in the vicinity of Częstochowa. Baryka consented. Changing into civvies

The Coming Spring

in Warsaw, towards which purpose Mr. Gajowiec assisted with an advance on his work in the office, Cezary set off for Nawłóć.

*

Arriving at a small railroad stop, the two friends found a team of four horses waiting for them. The horses were harnessed to a small, high carriage for two with a seat behind for the coachman. The latter, a strapping young fellow in livery, effusively greeted the young master safely back from the wars. This Jędrek had also returned in one piece from the army, in which however he had served a more peaceful, even domestic mission as the orderly of a certain dignitary who had held a high-ranking position during the unrest. There was however no time for lengthier tales of the relative merits of life in the field and in the antechamber, since night was about to fall. Hipolit Wielosławski hopped onto the front seat, sat his guest beside him, and ordered Jędrek to take his place up at the back; he took the four sets of reins deftly in hand and with visible relish cracked the long whip. The horses moved out of the station yard as one and dashed off down the muddy highway. Cezary had never ridden in a turnout such as this. He confessed inwardly, and shared his admission with Hipolit, that among the various sports he had engaged in this was a first-rate pleasure! When the chestnuts settled down to a steady canter, the carriage simply sailed along between the fields. It had been raining; the road was slippery and pitted with potholes still full of yellow water, but the

wheels of the light vehicle barely touched these puddles and flew ever onward. At a certain point "his excellency" tossed a laconic question behind him:

"The highway or via Leniec?"

"We don't really need to go 'bya' Leniec, but the highway is pretty muddy."

Hipolit turned off the main road onto a country lane, a narrow track leading between peasant holdings and scored by two ruts that years of driving to and fro had dug between a central ridge of luxuriant grass, and that stretched toward the horizon like two parallel rails. Crumbling fences of gnarly planks reached the height of the gentlemen's seats. It was as if this road had been specially created just so the team of chestnuts and the masters' light carriage could fly down it into the distance. Earth thrown up by the wheels and the horses' hooves was strewn behind in the form of round clods and flying spatters.

The autumn wind whistled about their ears. The horses seemed to bear with them a lust for life, a sense of the body's health and indefatigable energy, a delight in movement and speed, and above all the curiosity of youth, a curiosity so insistent that it forced its way in front of everything else—to know what was at the end of this bewitching road, what would be found beyond that pear tree in the distance. But beyond the solitary pear tree in the field there was nothing special. The fences came to a sudden end and another narrow track, at an angle to the first, ran across the fields. Hipolit gave a spirited crack of the whip. All at once he tugged the reins of the lead pair toward himself. They turned, still

The Coming Spring

at a run, and pulled the shaft pair after them. It all happened too abruptly. The carriage, which was hurtling across wet earth, was suddenly pulled in a semicircle and skidded as if on ice. The side of the wicker platform caught on the last fencepost; unable to continue on its way, the carriage tipped over and fell with a crash. Its wheels spun convulsively, while the travelers were ejected as if from a slingshot. Hipolit was holding tight to the reins and fell into the nearest wet furrow. Cezary had nothing to cling to and was flung far away; he ploughed across three muddy, liberally manured patches of land before his fashionable hat finally met an immovable obstacle in the fourth. On top of everything Jędrek also plunged from his perch and landed on top of Cezary, planting his teeth in the back of his skull. Fortunately the horses came to a stop and, brutally indifferent to the fate of those who provided their oats, set about nibbling the tasty roadside sorrel through their bits.

Baryka staggered out of the vegetable patches whose symmetry and fertilization he had thrown into disorder, examined his hat in despair and with his doubly battered head wondered how in such a state of ruination he could continue his journey and present himself to strangers.

“Ha ha ha!” roared Hipolit as he gazed at his companion, who kept grabbing himself by the back of the head, which hurt from the former orderly’s toothmarks. Yet, with the aid of that culprit, they somewhat managed to clean themselves up and straighten their bones, which luckily were not broken. They combined forces to right the carriage, climbed up, and drove off twice as fast as

before. As Jędrek put it, Hipolit "trialed" the horses. He did so thoroughly, till they bore the carriage like four devils across pathless tracts and stagnant meadows, along ditches or stream beds which nevertheless turned out to be ordinary roads. Dusk was already falling when they passed a handsome-looking country house.

"Leniec," said Hipolit shortly, pointing with his whip.

The word meant little to his guest, who was more interested to see that the carriage had emerged from the tracts of said Leniec and had sped onto a sandy road lined with ancient trees. It was night now. At the end of the avenue lights twinkled.

"You see those lights, Czarus?"

"I do."

"Then take heart, my friend! Take heart, I say, dammit! That's Nawłóć!"

At this moment Cezary felt a certain unease. He was embarrassed about something and, contrary to his nature, he felt somehow anxious and fearful. The horses galloped into a broad courtyard and came to a halt in front of a brightly lit verandah. From this verandah there came the mingled sounds of numerous male and female voices, all calling a name:

"Hipolit! Hipek! Hipcio! Hipeczek! Hip!"

Wielosławski was dragged from his seat by innumerable pairs of hands and found himself in their embrace. Left to his own devices, Cezary slowly climbed down from where he sat. But he was not forgotten. He was soon mounting broad, splendid, though oddly unstable steps onto the wide verandah, all set about with vine. By the light of lamps and candles various figures flashed

The Coming Spring

before his eyes: a tall, older lady with gestures that were vigorous and full of imperious majesty; a blond young lady with lovely blue eyes; a youthful priest; and an elderly gentleman with a black walrus moustache...

Hipolit introduced Baryka to those gathered on the verandah. Cezary bowed repeatedly and kissed the hand of the older lady, who turned out to be Hipolit's mother. He shook hands with the young priest, who, it transpired, was Hipolit's half-brother Anastazy or 'Nastek'; and with the young lady, Miss Karolina ('Karusia') Szarłatowicz, Hipolit's cousin; and with the elderly gentleman, Hipolit's uncle Michał Skalnicky. Everyone offered a friendly greeting to "this" Baryka and stared at him with a curiosity that for a "better" family was rather provincial, even parochial. Cezary acted the easy-going man of the world, though the thought of his dirty unmentionables and ruined collar rather cramped his style. The conversation was so chaotic that nothing could be understood of it. One person was speaking and so was another; there was joy and noise aplenty.⁸ Everyone asked questions and without waiting for an answer asked more. It was hardly surprising: the mainstay of the line, the eldest son, was back from the wars safe and sound, strong and tanned, as if he had been on a hunting trip in the neighborhood. Miss Szarłatowicz, who spoke most eloquently, most frequently and, it must be acknowl-

⁸ A reference to "Papa's Return" by Poland's leading Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855):

*One person speaks, another speaks—
There's joy and noise aplenty.*

edged, most shrilly, exclaimed looking at Hipolit but with one eye on “the other man”:

“You know, Hip, I can’t say that you look much like a worn-out war invalid. I’d say you’ve rather grown even fuller. Perhaps my eyes deceive me? No, I’m right—you’ve put on weight! You’ll have a second chin in no time. Or maybe it’s some special military sickness—some sort of dropsy or swelling?”

“How do you like that, Cezary—they have us for a pair of knaves who sat the war out in a sanatorium and now are passing themselves off as heroes.”

“Suffering and more suffering is what’s needed, young hero—and not just from the relentless enemy, but from the ladies,” laughed Baryka.

“I don’t recall anyone here mentioning ‘knaves,’” Miss Karolina said, bristling. “It’s just that everyone’s coming back so corpulent that it seems to me the war must have been a kind of nutritional cure.”

“What do mean ‘everyone,’ Karolina—who’s ‘everyone?’”

“Jędrek, for instance.”

“Well I never! This slip of a girl, who’s never so much as smelled a whiff of gunpowder, has the gall to suggest that we spent the war polishing boots in an anteroom like Mr. Jędrek there.”

“Not at all! I’m well aware that you pursued the enemy as doggedly as Czarniecki.”⁹

⁹ Stefan Czarniecki (1599–1665), a famous Polish general.

The Coming Spring

"You need to be careful what you say about the Bolshevik enemy! My friend Baryka here is—how shall I put it?—almost a Bolshevik himself."

"Really? You are, sir?" asked Miss Karolina in surprise, measuring the guest sharply from head to foot.

"He's joking!" murmured Baryka.

"I've never seen a real Bolshevik with my own eyes before..."

"What *have* you seen 'with your own eyes,' young lady from a white Ukrainian palace?"

"I've seen the barn from your manor house, and the manor from your barn."

"I must explain to you, Cezary, that Miss Szarłatowicz here, Miss Karolina—that's her Christian name—which is a shortcoming, it must be confessed—anyway, she lost her estate in the Ukraine as soon as the Bolsheviks came into existence. She was at boarding school in Warsaw, studying geography and algebra—really!—and stylistics, when her property was confiscated. Now she works for a living. Karolina Szarłatowicz tends the chickens of Nawłóć."

"Your chickens, o mighty one!"

"A figure of speech—there's stylistics for you," interjected the young cleric. "*Pars pro toto*.¹⁰ Karolcia doesn't just look after the hens..."

"But the geese too," added Hipolit.

¹⁰ A part in place of the whole (a figure of speech).

“Oh, here we go with the geese!” the priest exclaimed disapprovingly.

“Well, doesn’t she look after the geese and the cows and the calves and the foals?...I missed her, my dear padre. There were times—Cezary’s my witness!—when I’d be lying in a trench, and I’d begin to dream and express my dream aloud in words—I’ll write a letter to Karolina Szarłatowicz, her of the Rogala coat of arms. I’ll ask if the hens are laying well.”

“It’s just as well you never sent that letter, otherwise I would’ve written back! So there!”

“So there! With all those spelling mistakes you would have failed the test! You’d get an F! Though in the Ukraine no one would have minded. Who cares about Polish spelling over there...Dear Lord! It’s nothing but Russian there now—*wsyo po russki*...”¹¹

“I’m pained to see that you won’t let the lady speak, my friend,” said Cezary.

“He’s honest as the day is long and good as gold, but you must have noticed, sir, as you lay with him in those trenches, that he’s a poor, sorry little boy...”

“Karolina, don’t give in!” Father Anastazy egged her on. “Defend yourself, ruby-lipped maiden! If you don’t stun him into submission he’ll gain the upper hand again.”

“I forgive him everything in advance. The poor war hero, the invalid, the battle-weary defender of his flocks, his stables, his barns and carriages and whips...”

¹¹ Everything in Russian (Russian).

The Coming Spring

“Supper! Supper’s ready!” announced Father Anastazy enthusiastically. “*Primum edere, deinde philosophare*.¹² Is that not so, lieutenant?” he said, turning to Baryka.

“Unfortunately, it’s not even sergeant...”

“So what was your favorite tippie out there?” asked the priest, seizing a decanter of mature rye *starka* with a practiced hand.

“Our favorite was rot-gut, which we tippled all the time; but now Nastek, come and drink to this Czarus here...”

“Oh, his first name’s Czarus? I was about to ask—it’s a bit awkward not knowing.”

“All right, Mr. Czarus—our health! That’s a fine name, isn’t it, Karusia? Do you like it?”

“It’s quite a nice name,” smiled Miss Karolina.

“A name like that rolls off the tongue,” put in Uncle Michał.

“Czarus it is!” decided the priest, swallowing a goodly glass of very goodly *starka* in one.

The churchman was a thickset, corpulent fellow of average height. He had crew-cut hair and a round, chubby face blue with stubble on the sides and chin and under the nose. Health and good cheer radiated from his eyes, his face, and his imposing figure. He kept slapping his knee or his thigh, eager for any opportunity and any reason to burst out laughing. Before the *starka* wore off, the “padre” clapped Cezary on the knee and exclaimed:

¹² First comes food, then philosophizing.

“That was quite a hiding you gave to those Jews! Ha ha ha! Quite a hiding! A hiding to end all hidings—you’d have to scour the history books with a magnifying glass to find anything like it! That Piłsudski went flying in! Cut them open like a butcher! Then our godfearing Hal-ler chases after them and lays in! Then Sikorski crashes down on them like a cymbal! It was a godly affair...”

All at once he crossed himself surreptitiously, held his plump little hands together and for a good moment muttered something in Latin under his breath.

“The hiding was top quality, but it involved such an awful lot of marching...,” sighed Hipolit Wielosławski.

“Oh, you’ll soon eat your way back to health! You’ll be back on your feet before the day is out! Come on, bring in that soup! Bring in the veal! Could it be spit-roasted? Dear Lord...Karusia—could it be spit-roasted...?”

Miss Karolina raised two fingers in a solemn oath.

“But you’ll have to fix the salad yourself, Karusia...”

“Don’t you worry about the salad...”

“Are you sure?” fretted the cleric.

During all this babble of voices Hipolit’s mother sat in a deep armchair and did not say a word. She followed her son with her eyes and shed joyful, private, unrestrained tears.

“Mama’s having a quiet little cry to herself,” Hipolit said tenderly. ‘You all talk as loud as you like, and I’ll just sit and weep for all time.’ Am I right? Everyone has their own way of being happy. Now, my dear friend Czarus Baryka here has no father or mother. In fact, his father passed away not long ago. And in the most

The Coming Spring

dreadful circumstances! But Czarus is alive. And he fought till the ground shook. And he's walking. And laughing. And right now he's about to down another round of *starka!*"

"There you are! You said the magic word, Hip! Let's drink to a healthy life! And one delivered into its mother's arms!" cried Father Nastek.

"I can't drink, my dear reverend. As you know. My heart. As it is I'm thoroughly intoxicated when I look at this infantryman here....," said Mrs. Wielosławska, melting in a smile of happiness and not taking her radiant eyes off Hipolit for even a moment.

"Oh, Hip'll be fine now here in Nawłóć!" sighed the padre. "I really think he will. Don't you agree, uncle?" he said, turning to Skalnicki.

"I think so too," sighed their uncle.

"He should be respected!" the older lady resolved aloud. "He went to war to defend his country; he fought courageously and marched the length and breadth of the land on his own two feet!"

"Well, some of it was in a wagon," Hipolit put in quietly. "But not much. Those 'fur-hats' really gave me a good going-over, till Baryka saved me. In any case: you have to watch out!"

"And where did your mother pass away, sir?" Mrs. Wielosławska asked Cezary in a polite and kind-hearted manner.

"In Baku, ma'am."

"In Baku! So are you from there too?"

"That's a bit further than you, Mr. Courageous Infantryman," Miss Karolina hissed at Hipolit.

“Karusia! Let’s have Maciejunio bring that bigger glass here...What good is this one!” the priest fussed well-meaningly.

Everyone took their places at table, where they were joined by the steward, Mr. Turzycki, and two elderly aunts, one—Aniela—a widow, the other, Wiktoria, a old maid; and the hum of conversation intensified even more. The old butler Maciejunio was barely able to keep up with opening bottles. He even had difficulty doing it. The young master himself, ‘Lord Hipcio,’ had to help him, which led behind the large dresser to a clandestine collapse of the hierarchy—that is, to a warm embrace between Lord Hipcio and the venerable Maciejunio.

Cezary drank what was poured for him and ate what was put on his plate. Everyone gazed at him with delight, almost with love. Now old Maciejunio—who was so plump and swollen in his tight-fitting little frock-coat that he would have looked mortally ill with the dropsy were it not for his glowing, ruddy complexion—bent over him with such a smile that it seemed he would have liked to give this “young master” from elsewhere a kiss just as if he had been one of his own; he winked at him and pulled faces to make him choose the dusty old bottle in the wicker cover that he was holding in his hand. Now the two aunts, Aniela and Wiktoria, leaned towards him one across the other and asked him to tell them about his mother (“Absolutely everything about her!”), and when he opened up and told them everything, sincere tears came drip-drip-dripping from the eyes of both women! With Mr. Gajowiec it was one thing. But why the hell were these two old dames blubbing? Yet they really were

The Coming Spring

genuine tears, as if they had been relatives, or distant, unknown sisters who had taken pity on his dear mother's fate. Now Uncle Michał was trying to tell him something, some other secret that was new and more important than anything else. He had started but couldn't finish because everyone kept breaking in. They were ganging up on him to interrupt him. So he lost his temper, tugged at his moustache and rolled his eyes wildly.

And to cap it all there was Wojciunio! For ten minutes now, Maciejunio the butler had been quietly explaining to the lady of the house and to Master Hipolit that Wojciunio couldn't stand it any longer and was pleading to be allowed a look at the young master. Then take mercy and have him called! The door opened and there stood Wojciunio, the cook, who was just as old as Maciejunio the butler. The cook was known throughout the neighborhood for his stutter. He couldn't get a word out, but simply took off his white hat and laughed a joyful, old man's laugh reminiscent of a neighing horse. He waved his white hands at young Master Hipcio, trying to tell him something in sign language. Hipolit answered also in sign language and the two of them giggled in their happiness. The cook thanked them for their kindness and closed the door respectfully. Yet from behind the door there could still be heard his laugh and his delighted jabbering.

Dinner was not even half over, and already Cezary—'Czaruś'—had drunk 'bruderschaft'¹³ to the death with

¹³ A toast by which the drinkers agree henceforth to call one another by their first name and use the intimate form of the second person pronoun ('ty').

Father Nastek and Uncle Michał, and had even clinked glasses with both elderly aunts and with the young Miss Karusia. The lady of the house and mother of the line disapproved somewhat, but this evening all sense of order came unstuck and all distinctions were swept away.

From outside the darkened windows came the sound of something like shots. It was the old farm hands, welcoming the young master back from the army by cracking their whips in greeting in the traditional manner. Lord Hircio staggered over to the dresser and gathered an armful of bottles from its lower recesses, so generously and indiscriminately that a shocked Maciejunio had to wrest some of them gently from his grip—surely not! this is the late master's best gold Tokai—surely you're not giving it to the stable-hands! Hipolit emptied every last coin from his pocket book and, laden and gasping, went out onto the verandah. It was a dark autumn night. Since the others ran out after Hipolit, Cezary followed too. He gazed into that dark night at the faintly visible figures. He heard words of greeting.

“Hey there, Szymon, how are you! Is that you, Zerwa? Pawelek, you old skin-and-bones, is that leg still giving you trouble? Józio! Franek! Walek! Hey lads, come up here!”

Cezary perched on the balustrade of the verandah. He was feeling befuddled. He was drunk, but not from the wine. It was probably the first time in his life since the death of his parents that he had felt joy, a gusto for life, and happiness in his heart. He felt comfortable among these strangers, as if he had known them and loved them since time immemorial. Everything in this

The Coming Spring

house was good for the emotions, accepting and warm like the embrace of his mother and father. Here everything was in its place, well established and wisely safeguarded; everything attracted and enticed, like a warm stove in winter, or the shade of a great spreading tree in the summer heat. Here no contrary thoughts, hostile to this manor, ought to have arisen. And yet, when he returned to the dining room, sorrow seized his heart. The fresh air had dazed him, and further glasses of wine went to his head. He wept, he wept bitterly. He put his arm round Hipolit in a drunken embrace and whispered earnestly in his ear:

“Be on your guard, my friend! Keep your eyes open! For that silver cigarette case of yours alone, for the sake of a few silver spoons, those same people, believe me, the same people, Maciejunio and Wojciunio, Szymek and Walek, and even that Józio—Józio!—they’ll drag you out into the garden and cut your head off with an ax. Believe me! I know. Big, savage soldiers will stand you against the wall... Their hands won’t even tremble as they take aim! All for the sake of this silver sugar bowl alone! Believe me, Hipolit! I’m begging you...”

“What does he want?” asked Father Anastazy. “The silver sugar bowl? Take it, Czarus my friend—take it! Put it in your pocket! I only hope it’s not too big!”

There was less of a crowd now around the table. Mrs. Wielosławska had led her son into her own room. The two aunts had realized that the atmosphere was getting out of hand and had absented themselves from the dining room. There remained Uncle Michał, who was finally able to get to his story about his terrible

financial debacle, a coal company he had trustingly invested in with two Jews, the Kminek brothers... Cezary listened and reacted to the ups and downs of the tale, nodding, expressing his horror, and even threatening the Kminek brothers. Anastazy the ecclesiastic drank from his glass (and it was one of the larger ones), opened and closed his plump hands and pulled faces to show that he sympathized with Uncle Michał's narrative. Truth to tell, he would have liked to explode into laughter and clap his uncle on the knee or on the back—yet, as if out of spite, the story was a tragic one, even “tragical,” as Uncle Michał put it. And so the ‘père’ waited patiently for the end, as befitted a man of the cloth and a person of breeding, though he knew that in fact the whole palaver had no end. It would end with a sigh, a sob, and a sniff. What he would not have given for someone or something to interrupt this tommy-rot about the villainous Kmineks, which he had heard a thousand times before!

Karusia brought relief.

“You must be awfully, awfully tired!” she squeaked in her eastern lilt. “The two of you came all the way from Warsaw?”

“All the way from Warsaw...”

“Karusia, don't you think it might be time for the lieutenant to get some rest before tomorrow morning?” asked Nastuś the clergyman.

“I do indeed.”

“And where will our Mr. Czarus be sleeping? In the manor or in the Arianka?”

“He's been put in the Arianka.”

The Coming Spring

"I'm going to take you under my wing," announced the priest. "We can snore together. Oh, we'll snore the rafters off!"

"Maciejunio went with Hipolit to unpack. Pietrek's at the farm," fretted Miss Karolina.

"I'll manage, miss!"

"It's not so easy. I don't know if the beds have been made up over there."

"That I don't know, my dear. I don't know. Strike me down if you like, but I don't know the first thing about bedding," mumbled the priest, knocking back successive draughts.

"Then there's nothing for it—I'll have to take the two of you over there myself. I'll go and see."

"Capital idea. This guest of ours needs his sleep. We need to have a good snore tonight! There's no getting away from it. Come along, lieutenant!"

Cezary, who in this house had even consented to being lieutenant, found his battered hat and left, led by the priest and Miss Szarłatowicz. They descended the verandah steps and turned into a dark, overgrown garden, whose thick autumn foliage rustled in the night. They set off down narrow paths which time and again swung round in a semicircle. Before long, however, these curving paths petered out in a trackless expanse of grass. The priest wheezed and sighed, and eventually came to a stop. To Miss Karolina's anxious questions he gave oddly grudging and rude replies, and in the end stopped responding altogether. All that could be heard was his ever louder gasping and an ominous scuffling in the darkness. Miss Szarłatowicz hurried to his assistance and

in fact rescued him from a sorry plight. In the dark the tipsy cleric had walked into a young spruce tree, the whole of which had found its way under his cassock and between his legs, in such an obstinate manner that it was quite impossible either to hop over it, or to go round it, or in any way to dismount from the spruce with its luxuriant, springy branches.

“Damn these spruces,” the priest said peevishly. “Whose idea was it to put these monstrous things in the middle of the path!”

“It’s your own fault for wearing such a long cassock!” his cousin said as she liberated him. “In other countries priests have stopped wearing long dresses like that. Even we women wear shorter gowns, not all the way to the ground.”

“Quiet! Priests’ cassocks are none of your business...”

“They have to be—you’d never have gotten free of that tree if it hadn’t been for me.”

“Well, you’re right there. That scoundrel refused to come out from under me. But you should stay away from priestly robes! They’re not your concern! Mind your own affairs!”

A moment later Father Anastazy began singing at the top of his voice:

*Caroline, Caroline,
Prends ton chapeau fleuri,
Ta robe blanche
De dimanche
Et tes petits souliers vernis...*¹⁴

¹⁴ A popular French song of the time: “Caroline, Caroline, Take your flowered hat, Your white Sunday gown, And your patent leather shoes.”

The Coming Spring

"Nastuś! Why are you singing in the middle of the night?" laughed Miss Karolina.

"I'm on vacation, I'm on leave, in the bosom of my family, *Caroline*..."

"Auntie will hear..."

"Oh really! I hardly think so. She's not going to hear. The night's so dark no one could hear a thing. A priest *eo ipso* has to be a misanthrope. When I was in Paris..."

"All right, all right, you can tell us what happened in Paris. But we need to get a move on. It's starting to rain. Let's hurry up!"

They quickened their pace along the pathways of the garden, in the pitch-black night.

The priest moaned and complained ever more frequently about the obstacles in his way, and Cezary, who had never been here before, was obliged to hold onto Miss Szarłatowicz's arm to avoid the fate of the clergyman. This country maiden's arm, though small, was strong and muscular. Once he had taken hold, the soldier did not let go until all three of them stood before a white wall. Here the young lady found a door that Baryka had not noticed, and opened it. They entered a hallway with a stone floor on which their footsteps echoed loudly. Father Anastazy dragged himself heavily to a door that led off the hallway to the right, and opened it with considerably more of a clatter than necessary. Cezary went to follow him but Miss Karolina held him back, explaining that his room was further down the hall. From the depths of the dark room the priest called out:

"I'll find the bed on my own; you show the lieutenant the way..."

"Splendid instructions, my good guardian," whispered the young lady with a smile. "I wonder whether you really will find the bed?"

"Are you making fun of me or asking the way? Why wouldn't I find the bed? Really...I can see it already—here it is. Oh, my dear little bed..."

Caroline, Caroline,

Prends ton chapeau fleuri..."

"Good night, canon!" called Cezary.

"Good night, brigadier!" moaned the priest, collapsing down somewhere.

Miss Karolina and Cezary were left alone in the dark empty hallway. For a moment the young housekeeper of this place hurriedly searched for a candle in the corner, keeping her distance from the guest. At last, in a joyful voice she announced she had found one. She struck a match and lit the candle.

"This house," she said, "is supposed to have been an old Arian temple¹⁵; it's been converted several times. Now the steward lives here, and there are offices and guest rooms."

She opened a door to the right and showed Cezary into the room, holding the candle high.

"I think you'll find everything you need. I see the bedding is here. I'll send a boy over."

"Why send a boy! I'll manage on my own. In the war I learned to live a Spartan life. I have no special needs. But how will you get back to the other house?"

¹⁵ The Arians, or more properly the "Polish brothers," were a Christian religious sect in the 16th century.

The Coming Spring

"I'll manage."

"Oh, that won't do! I'll walk you back."

"That'll be just dandy! You'll walk me back because I'm afraid, then I'll walk you back because you don't know the way."

"I'll find my way—you already showed me."

"Very well then. You can walk me back some of the way, because the truth is I don't fancy being alone in the grounds."

"There, you see..."

Cezary opened the front door. A heavy rain had set in, lashing and insistent.

"Look, miss, it's raining."

"So it is."

"What shall we do?"

"I'll walk quickly."

"Quickly might be difficult in the dark garden with all those little spruce trees."

"There's no point in worrying. I can't stay here, and upstairs in the steward's apartment everyone is asleep. Off we go!"

They set out into the dark grounds. After a few moments Cezary said:

"You can use my overcoat. I have it round my shoulders."

"No, thank you."

"Please take it."

"No thank you, really!"

"Perhaps it's unseemly for you to put my coat on?"

"Certainly it is. I meet you for the first time and already I'm supposed to wear your coat. Besides, it's hardly Christian—you'll get wet yourself."

"Then let's be Christian about it and obey all the rules of etiquette to boot."

"Meaning?"

"We can both shelter under the coat."

"I can see you're Christian to a fault, and a connoisseur of etiquette, and a rather over-bold warrior too."

"A warrior has to be bold, miss. There, you see how bold I am."

Saying this, Cezary threw the right shoulder of his coat over Miss Karolina's shoulders, and with its left shoulder covered his own. And so as to shelter her as much as possible, he drew her firmly toward himself. Miss Szarłatowicz pulled away from him, but not entirely, and somewhat irresolutely. Putting his arm around her gently, and only enough to save her from getting wet in the rain, he could feel that her whole body was quivering. Her voice too trembled as she said:

"You know, sir, boldness doesn't always pay off. At least, I'm not the right person for soldierly forwardness."

"I wouldn't be so bold myself as to cause you any distress. If I have, it was unintentional and I beg your pardon."

"You haven't caused me any distress. But here's the manor! Good night, sir! Are you sure you'll find your way back?"

"Positive!"

"I hope you sleep well in your Arian temple..."

The Coming Spring

Cezary bowed to a laden pear or apple tree which in return covered him in raindrops—for Miss Karolina had already disappeared into the dark.

*

The next morning, Cezary awoke very early after an excellent night's sleep. The rain pattered on the window panes and a cold draft blew across the room. From the neighboring rooms there came the priest's heroic snoring (which was new to him) and Hipolit's (with which he was thoroughly familiar). Cezary's room had an extraordinarily high wooden ceiling and whitewashed walls. The windows and door were let into thick walls that were indeed reminiscent of an old Arian locutory, a room for meetings or prayers. The young man was in an excellent frame of mind; he got out of bed straight away, washed and combed his hair in exemplary fashion, dressed, and opened the door of his room. The hallway with the stone floor was even loftier than the bedroom. From it a flight of stairs led up to the next floor, where people were already walking about in heavy footwear and conversing. Opening the door to the garden, Baryka saw the grounds that he had crossed the day before in the dark.

The grounds were extensive, stretching from the hill on which the 'Arianka' stood down to the manor house surrounded by ponds and pools. The manor was built of wood but on stone foundations that in former times must have undergirded a different, taller edifice. Across the grounds there ran long avenues of hornbeams that led into the fields and distant brush. On one of these

avenues stood some crumbling wooden benches strewn with shriveled leaves and wet from the rain. All the avenues and paths were swathed in a damp mist that for Cezary had a particular charm. He wandered blissfully down the long naves of hornbeams without encountering a soul. He wrapped himself in his roomy coat and, sensing warmth in the November air, relished his physical health and mental felicity, luxuriating in it and growing intoxicated on it. He hummed to himself a joyful song that was scandalously foolish in content and unrefined in form.

One of the avenues of tall trees led him out of the grounds and into a farmyard, among barns, stooks of corn, cattle sheds, stables, piles of manure and purple-colored dung heaps. The people here had been up and about for a long time; each of them greeted the strolling "master" with a bow. And these bows spoiled the morning for this ideological communist, inducing in him a kind of consternation. And so he quit those peopled regions as quickly as he could. He found himself in a vegetable garden, and subsequently in a poultry yard. In separate wire enclosures there were modest hens and dignified roosters who time and again announced the utterly inclement weather with a shrill communiqué; then turkey hens croaked out their woes, while the cocks spread their mighty plumage with a wild jabbering, half mad with delusions of grandeur. A magnificent peacock sat motionless on a fence as if sculpted in multicolored bronze, sure of the appeal of his feathers and the colors of his neck. Clamorous guinea fowl were untiringly and cantankerously bawling out some truly indecent exple-

The Coming Spring

tives. Slovenly ducks lapped up food as they plunged their beaks and legs and bellies in a trough; geese emitted occasional bovine and truly Dulsian¹⁶ expressions of astonishment at everything and incomprehension of the entire world. There was so much of interest going on in this society that Baryka simply stood and stared at the poultry soviet.

His observations were interrupted by a most amusing scene. There appeared in the vicinity of the feeding troughs and chicken runs a young teenage missie, a slender, frail boarding-school stripling. She had come out of the house in which Baryka had spent the night. She was quite clearly a relative of someone in the farm management, visiting from the city or from far away; for she evinced a city-dweller's amazement at everything she saw, and she kept going astray and having to ask for directions from the farmhands as they passed by barefoot and with rolled-up pants. As she gazed at it all, the young miss strayed among the guinea fowl, a whole flock of which was clucking away beneath some black-currant bushes. How she managed to offend these Africans,¹⁷ Cezary did not see. All at once there happened an unexpected and incredible thing—one of the older individuals, with a crooked neck and disproportionately small light blue head, in other words the male of this vociferous brood, threw himself upon the languid young

¹⁶ Mrs. Dulska, the main character of *The Morals of Mrs. Dulska* by Gabriela Zapolska (1857–1921), was the epitome of hypocritical middle-class respectability.

¹⁷ Guinea fowl originate from Africa.

lady with claws and menacingly open beak. He jumped up from the ground right at the dumbfounded young maiden's stomach. The monster's tail, which was always pointed downwards, now became an additional talon, and the blue horn curving back on his head, an extra claw. The guinea fowl's ghastly cry, a clearly audible Polish imprecation—"dammit! dammit! dammit!"—and the attack by this gray-colored ball with its multitude of nails, beaks, and hooks, so terrified the girl that, with a scream which drowned out the cries of the fowl, she fled the scene. Arms, legs, laces, belts, the bands of her sweater, ribbons, pigtails, and the flounces of her underwear, all flapped in the wind—while a despairing wail pierced the idyllic autumn air. The guinea fowl did not give up the fight and did not allow itself to be conciliated by such manifest signs of capitulation, but rushed off in pursuit of the fleeing young girl with its own cry, which took on an ever more menacing and warlike tone.

The petrified young lady was making for the Arianka, legging it faster and faster. At last she tumbled into the large doorway that gave onto the courtyard. There she filled the lofty hall and stairs with convulsive sobs and cries for help addressed to some aunt of hers, till eventually she slammed a door upstairs and fell silent in the fastness of the upper floor. Yet the guinea fowl did not give up even then. It pursued its prey heroically into the hallway with the stone floor, bursting in all the way to the foot of the stairs and then, standing in an aggressive posture right in front of the staircase up which the young city dweller had disappeared, for a long while it continued to shriek out its "dammit! dammit! dammit!"

The Coming Spring

as it proclaimed its victory. It had been a long time since the stable hands, the women from the servants' quarters and the farm girls had been so royally entertained. Some of the men were quite prostrate with laughter as they viewed the scene. Even when the stumpy guinea fowl returned from the Arianka to its own community, replete with glory and triumph, the young miss from the city did not dare so much as poke her head out of doors.

But the observer began to feel the autumn cold. He decided to go down to the manor, take a look at it in the daylight and, *last but not least* as the English say, have something hot to eat and drink. Besides, he had a deep-felt desire to share his morning impressions with Miss Karolina, and above all to find out from her who it was the African beast in the farmyard had battled so fiercely and defeated so convincingly. He even toyed with the idea of arranging specially to become acquainted with the defeated party and having a chat with her about guinea fowl in general. He circled the manor quietly without encountering a living soul. All the shutters were still closed, and silence reigned inside. The manor was huge, with a mansard roof. Over the roof spread the boughs of lofty trees.

Finding the front steps he had taken the day before, Cezary Baryka entered the main hall. From it the door was open to the dining room where they had feasted the previous evening. No one was about, but the table had been completely cleared after the meal. A fire burned in the great green-tiled fireplace. The sight and sound of the flames on such a chilly morning was truly delightful. The great burning logs of pine or fir seemed to fill the

large, rather austere room with the laughter and chatter of a sizeable company. Baryka warmed his hands before the fire, but immediately by the fireplace it was too hot. He spotted a large old sofa in the corner of the room; he went swiftly up to it, sat down in its furthest corner and, gazing at the distant glow of the flames, set about "thinking." The contemplation of the fire, whose glow illumined his memories and dreams, his reveries, the drowsiness of his soul, his recollection in images of all he had experienced, his vague notions of what he had not, and his memories of what he had seen and had imagined—all this constituted a veritable plunge into his inner being, an examination of his very essence.

But these moments were intruded upon. Cezary Baryka was interrupted in his reverie like Tadeusz Soplica¹⁸ after his arrival in the country. But it happened rather differently. From somewhere far off in the distant depths and hallways of the house someone could be heard humming Father Anastazy's song from the day before—"Caroline, Caroline..."

The door opened and into the dining room came Miss Karolina in person—but in such dishabille! She was actually in her nightgown. Evidently her bedroom was close by, and she had come straight from bed to warm herself a little by the fire. She had soft, well-worn slippers on her stockingless feet; her hair was let down and—let us tell the whole truth!—disheveled, and she

¹⁸ The title character of *Pan Tadeusz* or *Master Tadeusz*, a long poem by Adam Mickiewicz published in 1834 and widely considered the Polish national epic.

was just brushing it; and all she wore was the little nightgown, trimmed extremely short below, and lacy and transparent above. Stopping in front of the great fireplace, Miss Karolina began executing various pirouettes and affected airs, bending forward and leaning sideways. Probably with the aim of warming herself at the same time on such a cold morning, she lifted up her already diminutive little nightshirt, then covered herself with it ineffectively once again when some part of her became too hot. Humming and rocking, she brushed her long, golden hair. Now with her right leg, now with her left she performed airy *pas* toward the fire, as if she were alone on a stage and were presenting a Bacchic dance for the delectation of viewers sitting low in the stalls, there in the depths of the glowing fire. Cezary was captivated by what he saw, even though he was sitting not in the stalls but in a distant loge. He had never before set eyes upon such harmoniously beautiful, youthful, firm female contours. Every movement and articulation of Miss Karusia's body was filled with an irresistible charm. And yet it was an act of beastliness to sit for too long enjoying the sight of this young beauty in her undress. And so Baryka, not without lengthy reflection, coughed and said cheerfully:

"I'm afraid your hair might catch fire and then—"

He did not have time to complete his sentence, which expressed a concern that was entirely justified, provident, fatherly even; for Miss Szarlatowicz uttered an abrupt exclamation, somewhat like the young girl fleeing the guinea fowl, and rushed from the room at such a dash she almost tore the door off its hinges. As long as

the door had been a door, its handle a handle, and its hinges hinges, it had never been treated so explosively. The old warped boards continued to shake on their terrified hooks for some time yet, their frightened handle rattling. The fire in the hearth seemed to pop and crackle, blaze and roar with laughter at double and treble its usual strength, as if in its depths there really was a delighted audience applauding Miss Karusia's adventure.

Cezary didn't know if he should sit where he was or, in deep embarrassment, stand and leave. He stayed. After a while Maciejunio appeared in his morning coat, even wearing a tiny cap of the kind he must have seen on the bald pates of *maîtres d'hôtel* during his travels around Europe with the late master—"God rest his soul..."

Seeing the morning guest on the sofa, Maciejunio was overcome with worry and concern; he was almost in tears. How could this be! Breakfast was not yet on the table and here a guest, such a guest, the best friend of the young masters, was waiting! He bestirred himself and started bustling about like a spinning top; he positively hopped about in his haste. He soon rounded up the barefoot maids and sent them into the dining room, along with some young Piotreks and Floreks who happened to be "to hand." The table was laid and in a twinkling there appeared baskets of rye loaves, home-made buns, shortbread, and crescent rolls. Maciejunio personally brought in jars of honey, jams, preserves, and juices. Here he put "a wee pat of butter," there the crescent rolls. He smiled beneath his trimmed gray moustache as he gazed at one jar in particular, which he indicated with

The Coming Spring

a subtle gesture, and “made so bold” as to whisper its very great praises. Cezary swore with his eyes that he would unwrap the jar and taste it, and even reach deep into its contents. From his experiences the day before he had learned to count on Maciejunio’s opinion. A tray was solemnly brought in bearing earthenware pots. One of them contained coffee—genuine coffee, not some devilish German *ersatz*—true “kawusia,” whose aroma filled the entire house. Also in the earthenware pots were helpings of cream. With skins from the heat of the stove, these little pots smiled at the guest, baked as they had been by an outer fire.

Without waiting for the other occupants of the house, Cezary set to work on the “kawusia,” the skins, the “drop of cream,” the bread, which he consumed in thick soldierly slices, the crescent rolls, which he dispatched whole, and the shortbread, honey, and jams. Maciejunio hovered about the table from time to time and with his eyes, his smile, or an imperceptible gesture approved the guest’s maneuvers and actions. Asked if no one else in the house was up, the old butler replied that they were all still asleep. Miss Szarłatowicz had already risen, it was true, but now she had gone back to bed and would not be eating with them at all today, since she was unwell.

“Really? She’s been taken ill?” asked Baryka concernedly.

“So it seems...She has a headache. A fever. It’s this constantly changing weather. One minute the sun’s shining, the next it’s raining. It never used to be like this around here. Once the good weather started, it went on. And how...Evidently the young lady has a *wee inflamma-*

tion from all this bad weather. Some people say the war has something to do with the bad weather. All that artillery fire...But in these parts we can't know for sure about that sort of thing..."

"Maybe it's the war," sighed Cezary, polishing off some first-rate peach marmalade.

It turned out that not everyone was fast asleep, for a cheerful humming was heard, and Hipolit Wielosławski bounded like a lion onto the verandah. A moment later he was in the dining room. Maciejunio and his subordinates scurried about in the halls and the unseen recesses of the kitchen. At once new trays appeared, with new loaves of bread in the place of the old ones half-consumed by Baryka, new baskets of rolls, new butter dishes and full jars of jam.

Hipolit ate with a vengeance. In addition to the delicacies already served he requested supplements in the form of *serwelatki* or smoked sausages, hams, and this or the other kind of cheese. Finally he had had his fill; he tossed down his napkin and rose from the table.

"Where on earth is Miss Karolina? Is she still sleeping?" he asked Maciejunio.

"Apparently...the young lady's not feeling so well today."

"Is she bedridden?"

"Heaven forbid! It's nothing serious; she's just off-color."

"I see. Let her be off-color! Right then. Cezary—to horse! Are you coming with me?"

"I should think so!"

They left proudly and loudly. The courtyard was paved like a town square. The stables were situated at its

The Coming Spring

far end. The doors were open and on the threshold Jędrek was waiting, scrubbed and stiff, in black and white checkered pants and a red jacket. Hipolit dashed into the stables and greeted the horses. In a big voice he called each of his eight mounts by name; he hailed the team horses and the infirm ones. He passed from stall to stall, now shouting, now patting the horses, as if he were with his closest friends. He had tears in his eyes and a smile of happiness on his face.

Jędrek the groom followed right behind him. In his every movement, in the tone of his voice, in his joy and sadness he copied his master—not to mention his views, opinions, and principles concerning both the stables and the world in general. Cezary concluded from his observations that this Jędrek could have fitted whole into Hipolit Wielosławski. He was inside him, and his entire being revolved within the other like some dark planet around a dazzling sun. During his time in the war Jędrek had found himself among highly-placed persons and had learned to use grand, florid words belonging to oratory and high style. As he spoke he would insert here and there, not always in the most appropriate place, words like “alternatively,” “evidently,” “practically,” “relatively,” and in particular “absolutely.” This “absolutely” he thoroughly overused. He also overused the adverb “nevertheless,” which issued from his mouth out of the blue in the middle of a regular declarative sentence. For instance Jędrek would say:

“I must show you, sir: the sorrel’s lost some weight, and nevertheless the English mare has too.”

"I can see that perfectly well myself. Pardon me for asking, but what have you been doing all morning?"

"I was in the team horses' stalls cleaning out the muck, alternatively the manure."

"So why has the sorrel lost weight? A horse gains weight from currycombing. Did you know that or not?"

"Absolutely!"

"But whose fault is it about the sorrel? Out with it!"

"That swine Namulak rode it to pick up the mail."

"He rode my horse to pick up the mail! The mail! On the sorrel! I'll skin him alive!"

"I said the same thing to the *stewart*. Riding our horse, the sorrel, to pick up the mail! Skin him alive! So for using our horses I went and smashed Namulak right in the gob, alternatively in the mug."

"Good for you, philosopher!"

"Good for me! I said: 'you *scoundrel*, keep your filthy hands off our horses! Keep your distance! Absolutely!"

This word buzzed constantly on his lips, sometimes complete and sometimes unfinished. Passing from horse to horse, the friends observed in one place the dryness of head and limb and the cup-shaped hardness of the hooves with their shining, unbroken horn; and elsewhere the soft skin and smooth, glistening silky coat. At the sight of the newcomers the horses turned their heads toward them; their great nostrils flared and their eyes were curiously animated under fine lids. Their veins bulged visibly beneath their short pelage, and the blood could be seen coursing through them, singing a veritable anthem of life. They shifted from one foot to the other, and their restless ears seemed to be listening intently to

The Coming Spring

what the visitors were saying to one another. Hipolit patted his darlings on their protruding rumps, their broad, smooth backs, and their sloping shoulders and long, slender, curving necks. Every so often he murmured an endearing name and pressed his own face to the large angular cheekbones. Cezary gazed into those unfamiliar eyes that were filled with intelligence, fire, and secret dreams that would never be grasped or fathomed by the dreams of humankind. He listened to the short, indistinct sighs that time and again rose from their deep, powerful chests, speaking of a longing for food and drink, the eternal source of killing and slaughter among the despicable two-legged species—or a longing for something else, something entirely unknown to the two-legs, distant, and yearned for in reverie. Amid his joyous communion with the horses, in which everything was agreeable and exciting, even the smell of ammoniac and the stink of horse-sweat—Cezary was suddenly shot through by a sense of alienation and isolation. As if they had passed from the abyss of their existence into the depths of his soul through the eyes of the horses, his father and mother sobbed within him. A bitter, acrid thought, the fruit of all he had seen in his life, pushed to the fore in the shape of a scathing question:

“When will the abominable day come when this Jędretek will find the courage and the strength to grab the young master by the throat and smash him in the gob, alternatively in the mug? And is Maciejunio capable of pushing her ladyship out the front door, right into the clutches of the mob? Is he capable of letting in the poor of the surrounding villages so they can finally see what’s

in there, what there is in that drawing room, in the middle of the old manor house that's more inaccessible and mysterious to the crowd than the church in Nawłóć?"

Cezary fended off this revolting and insistent notion, which had preyed on him the previous evening too. Hipolit Wielosławski was giving orders:

"The wagonette! Is the wagonette clean and oiled; is it ready?"

"Absss..."

"Harness the sorrel to it!"

Turning to Cezary he asked:

"Czaruś, will you ride with me?"

"Surely."

"You won't have had a ride like this in all your days. You'll see! Harness up the sorrel!"

Jumping about like lightning, with rapid movements Jędrek wheeled the wagonette from the neighboring coach house. It was a carriage with tall wheels and a narrow lengthwise seat; it resembled a skinny spider in outline. Its shining harness was quickly put on the sorrel, and that magnificent horse found itself between the two poles. The bony, muscular four-year-old twitched in the harness and clopped its hooves against the stone surface of the courtyard. Hipolit grabbed the reins from Jędrek and asked Cezary to sit with his back to him, like a "double-headed eagle." Both planted their feet firmly against the inner iron bars encasing the axles. Hipolit took the whip in hand and clicked his tongue at the sorrel. The horse set off at a brisk trot.

To begin with, Hipolit Wielosławski rode along the broad roadway littered with potholes and bumps, where

The Coming Spring

he was unable to give the sorrel full rein. For Cezary, sitting with his back to the horse, it was the first time he was seeing the landscape that sped by so abruptly. The fields rushed into view on both sides like two unconnected parts. He had a curious sensation of redoubled newness and alienation; yet at the same time it was utterly charming. The day was misty, cold, and sleepy. The fields were completely deserted. Only here and there, far away the odd person could be seen at work. Their dark, mobile forms passed over the gray and yellow fields, across surfaces that looked as if they had been stripped of their skin, around solitary wagons. Somewhere in the distance an unseen bonfire was burning, its white smoke rising in a tall column into the mist.

"We're almost at the highway," said Hipolit. "Now we'll be able to get a move on. Hold on to your hat."

"Yessir!"

Hipolit locked arms with Cezary at the elbows in such a way that they were firmly linked to one another. The wagonette gave a sudden rattle as it moved out onto the stone-surfaced highway rough from sharp pebbles of flint and granite. Hipolit cracked the whip once, twice, three times. The horse leapt forward and accelerated to a full gallop.

The wagonette began to lurch from one rut to the other, and from one ridge of crushed rock to the other. Hipolit's flicks of the whip made it go faster and faster. In the end it was hurtling along at a crazy pace, as fast as the horse's strength would allow. Cezary could no longer see anything at all. His entire efforts were concentrated on keeping his balance and staying back to back with

Hipolit. The wheels of the carriage seemed not to touch the ground but simply flew along the road, pitching left and right and rattling ever more frequently.

“Mind out now! *Full pace!*” Hipolit roared in English.

And indeed, the pace became so full that Baryka closed his eyes. He was expecting disaster. He would have been glad to unhook his arms from Hipolit’s and jump out at that full pace, but Wielosławski did not let go of his passenger. His voice as he urged the horse on became wild and ferocious. His whip snapped in the air. This mad ride went on so long that the passenger lost all hope of it ever ending. He felt dizzy and sick.

But nothing would have induced him to confess to such unknightly sensations. He maintained a manly silence and doggedly endured. As if in a dream, during their flight he heard someone calling. He caught sight of some moving spots to the side, but they were so out of focus and so shaky that they failed to enter his consciousness. Yet Wielosławski was beginning to rein in his steed. The wagonette was still racing along, but now it kept to the middle of the road. Hipolit unlocked himself from Cezary’s arms and with all his strength pulled on the reins of the runaway horse. At last he gained control, brought it down to a trot and came to a standstill.

“Look what that madman did to me!” exclaimed Hipolit, jumping to the ground.

“What madman?”

“One of the madmen...”

Hipolit was in fact covered in mud from head to foot. His face could barely be seen beneath the spatters.

“I think someone was calling to you,” said Cezary.

“Where?”

He looked about the fields and gave a delighted laugh:

“Oh! Mrs. Laura...”

“Where? Who’s Laura?”

“Our neighbor, Mrs. Laura Kościeniecka, with her fiancé. See, over there!”

Cezary looked around and indeed spotted the “neighbor.” A young lady was approaching on a splendid gray, at a beautiful, magnificent gallop. Next to her trotted a rider on a bay. The lady rode astride like a man, holding herself ably in the saddle and in full control of the horse. As she came down a side lane and approached the two heroes of the wagonette standing in the highway, Cezary was able to study her tight-fitting man’s outfit, her light boots, yellow unmentionables, short jacket and low, round hat. Her luxuriant blond hair, of an extraordinarily beautiful color and tied in a large knot at the back of her head, was perfectly framed by the low headwear. The lady was in peals of laughter as she gazed closely at Hipolit.

“We came as quickly as we could to your rescue, neighbor! Mr. Władysław and I were just riding my boundaries when we noticed that someone’s pony had bolted—ha, ha, ha!...”

“You’re mistaken, ma’am. The pony hadn’t bolted at all...,” retorted Hipolit in a huff.

“Really? It hadn’t? I’m relieved to hear it. I was all set to offer some neighborly sympathy.”

“In any case, for your sympathy I thank you in my own name and that of my friend here, Cezary Baryka.”

"Aha!" She nodded to Baryka. "Though I have the impression that my neighbor was rather nettled by my sympathy....," she continued teasingly, turning back to Hipolit.

In general she seemed to pay no attention whatsoever to "my friend Baryka," as if he were a much less interesting component of this equipage than the sorrel horse.

"Look how you've lathered him up!" put in Mrs. Kościeniecka's companion in a powerful bass voice. "He's covered in foam. I think you must have overheated him. Listen to him gasping! When did you get back?"

"Yesterday."

"*Tiens!*" exclaimed Mrs. Laura. "And such a strenuous escapade the very first morning!"

"In the war we got used to rising early."

"So you too fought in the war?" the young lady asked, turning to Cezary.

"Yes. Of course. That's right, in the war."

"Allow me to introduce myself," Mrs. Kościeniecka's companion said to Cezary in his deepest bass. "The name's Barwicki."

"Baryka."

"It's an honor to meet some real soldiers....," he said, his eyes narrowing shrewdly. "My own work has only been locally here, in organization and paperwork. I have the deepest respect for soldiers."

"Everyone knows that it was because of your asthma you couldn't serve," put in Mrs. Kościeniecka.

The Coming Spring

"You suffer from asthma, Mr. Władysław? Really? I had no idea," said Hipolit in surprise. "You must have come down with it during the war."

"Not at all! Mr. Władysław had attacks of breathlessness before; then the asthma came to light when he was examined by the army doctors at the recruiting office."

"With all my heart I wish you a speedy return to health," said Wielosławski with sincere derision for the powerful rider, who could have smashed his way through fortified walls with that asthma of his.

"Thank you, thank you," muttered the other man, hurriedly shaking the hand that was proffered him.

"But did you gentlemen realize that you're on my land?" asked Mrs. Kościeniecka all of a sudden. "You've crossed into my field. 'A stag on my land is my stag,' as they say. Do come and join me for breakfast."

"Mrs. Laura! In this condition? Please, look at me and have mercy. Can I go to Leniec covered from head to foot in mud like this?"

"Of course you can! We may even find a scrap of soap there somewhere. You'll wash up a treat, and the boy can clean your clothes."

"But we came straight from the stables!"

"I said, join me for breakfast."

"Mrs. Laura!"

The beautiful Amazon turned her gray about and rode off the highway onto a side track leading diagonally across harrowed fields on which there was a thin covering of winter crop.

She was followed by her fiancé. The two army men climbed back into the wagonette and set off after them.

This time Cezary turned to face the horse and could see the Amazon. She rode most handsomely, and above all most skillfully.

She was slim, uncommonly shapely, muscular and obviously strong—neither too skinny nor too fat. Her eyes were a true azure blue. In her there was not a trace of flirtatiousness, excess, insincerity, or snobbery. She was natural and honest in every gesture, word, and smile. From time to time she turned back to the wagonette to ask a question or make some cheerful remark. At such moments her horse found itself in the leveled earth that the recent harsh morning rain had further flattened, and its hooves sank up to the fetlocks in the fresh dough of the land. Then the rider's thighs, breasts, and arms rose and fell in the saddle in harmony with the movements of her mount. She bent back slightly or leaned gracefully forward to the rhythm of the horse's steps. Her lovely face radiated good health, and her comely bosom breathed in and out spasmodically, unconstrainedly taking in mouthfuls of air that had never passed through anyone else's lungs.

In this lady there was some quality of openness that inclined one to friendly feelings.

But her beauty and her evident, as it were solid grace in the saddle moved the young men as they gazed at her. Their eyes glowed. When the engaged couple moved somewhat further ahead, smiling and whispering their own affairs, Hipolit quietly informed Cezary:

"Laura's a widow. Her first husband was Kościeniecki. He was some kind of writer, a literary fellow. Died two years ago. He had a splendid property—there, you can

The Coming Spring

see it now—Leniec. Kościeniecki was always decrepit; he was sickly and a misanthrope. He had nothing in common with anyone in the neighborhood. He was an unpleasant man. Anyway, he's dead. Now this Barwicki is clamoring for her hand. They're already engaged; I see she's even got a bit of a crush on our asthmatic there."

"What do you expect from a Laura? You have romantic names in these parts."

"Oh, he's just a nouveau riche. He has a fine estate, Suchołustek, and he also has interests in industry and trade. He's very well off. A first-rate wheeler-dealer. They can't get married as quickly as he'd like because Kościeniecki's mother lives at Leniec. It's a complicated situation. Kościeniecki had two children by his first wife. The children have rightful claims to part of the estate. She herself can't pay off either the mother or the children. And so on. And Barwicki also has an eye on Leniec, because it would bring him into good-class society. Look at the way the rascal's working her! Do you see it?"

"Now then, Hipek, could that be the green-eyed monster jealousy issuing from your lips?"

"Me? Jealous of Laura? No! She's pretty as a picture, it's true. But I can do without her."

"Honestly?"

"As if I'd not be honest with you! You remember what that Russian officer used to say in such circumstances..."

"I do, I do!..."

Oh, how lovely was the rutted lane they were driving along! Though there wasn't even anything so special about it. Here and there grew sloes and hawthorns with

sharp barbs, overlooked by humans and left alone for lack of time. The hawthorns had their haw fruit at that time of year, with a pinkish color more lovely than the prettiest woman's lips. A cluster of them grew in a half-circle amid rocks that generations ago farmhands tending the land had ploughed up and tossed into that place. So something-or-other had just grown and spread there in the field. Beyond it a treeless expanse lay on the glowing earth. Far away on the horizon were the avenues around Nawłóć; closer by were the copses of Leniec.

The engaged couple went ahead, gesturing to the two soldiers from afar that they should hurry up. On their magnificent horses against the bright fields, the brace of riders made a fine sight. Cezary murmured:

"How do you like that! Before we get there it'll all be over."

"Hardly! She knows her own worth. I hope she does! She's as smart as the devil himself."

"So why are they rushing ahead like that?"

"So we can be received fittingly. You'll see...But just in case—let's get a move on! And spoil the fat guy's plans!"

The terrain sloped down toward a gully at the bottom of which, among smallish meadows there flowed a creek with steep banks. Further on, on the far side of a rickety little bridge there was a hill with Leniec at its summit. In a trice the wagonette was rumbling up to the verandah of the "mansion." It was more of a villa than a mansion or a manor. Two-storied, with mirror-like windowpanes, an almost flat roof and a needle on top, it would not have been out of place in a summer resort as the home

of a German factory owner or a nouveau-riche Jew. The barbaric Sarmatian neighborhood in which it stood was not even spared a pair of cupids holding wreaths daubed with thick oil paint on the villa's façade. The two gentlemen from Nawłóć left their horses with the waiting "man" and climbed the concrete steps (badly cracked in places) to the hall, from which a tail-coated footman led them directly to a bathroom. Here they washed, combed their hair and cleaned off the mud, and looking oddly well-groomed, they entered the drawing room. But then they passed through that room into the next, in which there stood a large bookcase containing books bound sumptuously in leather and morocco. Mr. Barwicki was sitting there with a book in his hand; the lady of the house was absent.

"You see..." Hipolit murmured pointedly to Cezary. "You see how fine it is here..."

"Yes indeed," smiled Cezary. "You were right, it's truly fine."

Mrs. Kościeniecka came unnoticed down the steps that led from the entrance hall. She was wearing a modest, fashionable gown. Now her beauty shone differently. It was strange, almost astonishing, to look upon her now, so altered was she. Without a hat now, her hair gleamed like gold, while her arms in the low-cut dress were revealed in the splendor of their perfect shape and exceptional loveliness. Clad in soft, almost transparent clothing, Mrs. Laura was unlike her own self. Strikingly different were her feet in lacquered shoes, the same feet that had clung with such iron firmness to the iron stirrups. Her calves, in the smooth gray silk of her stock-

ings, were now as slender as a teenager's. Only her eyes remained the same, candid and truthful. Whereas her mouth was less candid and vital, for it was now covered lightly with a lipstick whose color recalled the fruit of the briar rose.

Cezary sat by the bookcase and gazed at the bindings of the books. Indifferently he read some of the titles imprinted in gilt letters on the spines. He remembered, he remembered...His father's bookcase, the books...The books had been just like this, titles lined up in a gilded row. He remembered the layout and furnishings of his family home. He sighed to himself at his fate. He was a stranger everywhere, alone. A foreigner among his countrymen, a stray dog without master or yard. He gazed at the books and thought about how everything is uncertain, haphazard, transient, susceptible to bestial destruction. Where were his father's books; where was his home, his father, his mother? Killed like dogs for some original sin, and cast into the ditch like dogs!

The labor of their lives had amounted to nothing. They had been unaware that they were working towards a vindictive death. Their entire lives had been a ridiculous mistake, a bloody misunderstanding.

And all these people here, so sure of what they have. Dammit! They know nothing of what is, of what there sometimes is in the world, and yet they're so sure of what they have. Why are they so sure, when nothing is sure in the world. A terrible nothing. He alone, Cezary Baryka, had seen with his own eyes how nothing was sure...

The Coming Spring

"Do you like books, sir?" asked Mrs. Kościeniecka, sitting opposite him.

"Books? Not really. I like fine bindings."

"But not what's inside, between the covers?"

"Not really. Though it's hard to say for certain... Recently I've had no time for reading, and before, when I did, the will was lacking."

"And whereabouts are you from? Pardon my female curiosity..."

"He's from Baku..." said Hipolit.

"All the way from Baku!" said Mrs. Laura in honest, unfeigned amazement.

"That was where my father lived. My mother died there."

"But you're going to stay here? In our part of the country?"

"For a while..."

"In any case here, in our parts, you'll remain for a while longer. Is that not right, Mr. Hipolit? Because we have a plan. We're planning a ball at Odolany. And we can't find male dancers to save our lives! You do dance, don't you?"

"I do."

"In that case we have a new dancer! Splendid!"

"I don't know when the ball's taking place. I don't know if I'll be able to attend."

"Czaruś, my dear friend, just drop it. In such matters I'm the one who decides, not you."

"That's the spirit!" exclaimed the beautiful lady. "Don't let him go! Don't let him go!"

A footman entered and in a quiet voice announced that breakfast was served.

*

Miss Wanda (or “Wandzia”) Okszyńska had turned sixteen, but she had been unable to scramble her way from the fifth to the sixth class in the public school in Częstochowa. In the end she was told she must quit the establishment since nothing would come of her studies.

The efforts of her father, a bank official, came to nought, for she was indeed unsuitable material for the sixth class. To put matters briefly, she didn’t know her multiplication tables “at random,” and all her “vocabulary words” kept flying out of her poor head. Her unfortunate father finally lost patience and refused to look upon this family “dunce.” Her mother—sister of Mrs. Turzycka, who was married to the steward that ran the estate of the Wielosławski “counts” at Nawłóć—sent the incorrigible “dunce” to her sister in the country, so that at least for some time she should escape her father’s gaze and his heavy fist. It was this Miss Wanda Okszyńska whom Cezary Baryka had seen fleeing from the vengeful guinea fowl.

This Miss Wanda had only one skill to justify her existence: she played the piano. Nothing found its way into her head except music. She could play all day without eating or drinking—she could go without sleep, and even be unaware that she was alive, if only she were allowed to plonk away at the piano. And so she plonked away. Her parents spent a fortune renting an instrument

The Coming Spring

and paying for expensive lessons from music masters. The latter shook their heads in astonishment, and declared as one man: she has exceptional ability, an extraordinary ear, an amazing memory—she's a genuine talent! This made no impression whatsoever on Miss Wandzia. She played for the music alone. She grew intoxicated on that "higher" music of hers like a drunk on moonshine. After she arrived in Nawłóć and took up residence in her uncle and aunt's apartment, where there was no piano, the wretched "dunce" wandered about like a lost sheep. After some time Aunt Turzycka found Wandzia sitting at the table and passionately running her fingers across it, not forgetting the imaginary foot pedal. Tears poured from the exiled girl's eyes as she played there on the office table while her Uncle Turzycki was out.

Miss Karolina Szarłatowicz, who often visited the steward and his wife, brought news of Miss Okszyńska's longing for a piano; she recounted this information at length before the company in the so-called "palace" and framed it in the requisite light. Father Anastazy, Aunts Aniela and Wiktoria, and in fact all the occupants of the house began to demand that the young musician have immediate access to the "palace" piano, which stood there under its cover, having quite forgotten that it was a musical instrument at all and slowly growing accustomed to its role as a valuable but essentially useless piece of furniture. Not without a degree of resistance, Mrs. Wielosławska acquiesced. And thus Miss Wanda Okszyńska was able to lay hands on the piano. She was allowed to ply her art under the following stipulations: it

was to be 1. before dinner; 2. when there were no guests; 3. when no one was ill; 4. when no one was asleep; 5. when in general no one objected.

Upon their return from breakfast at Mrs. Laura's, Hipolit and Cezary climbed the steps to the verandah and heard from the drawing room a superb rendering of Chopin's polonaise in A major. Father Anastazy, who had long been up and "ages ago!" had celebrated mass at the parish church in the village of Nawłóć Dolna, and now was overseeing the preparations for lunch that were currently in progress under the command of Maciejunio, explained to the new arrivals who was playing and recounted the whole story of Miss Wandzia. He enjoined them not to disturb the pianist, and indeed not to look into the drawing room at all, but instead to sit quietly in the dining room and have a judicious drink that Maciejunio would not omit to offer before the meal. But the two knights, who had returned in capital humor, were of a different opinion. They decided to do the opposite—to visit the musical miss and get to know her right away. Hipolit led the way, opening the door to the left of the hall that led to the drawing room, and dragging his friend after him. The latter recognized the victim of the guinea fowl's mistreatment. She was standing by the piano, flustered in her schoolgirl's way by the entrance of the two young gentlemen, of whom one was—o woe!—the hereditary master of Nawłóć and adjoining properties. She curtsied before the master and with a pleased expression gave him her hand when he deigned to offer his own. She made a better impression than when she was running away across a farmyard.

The Coming Spring

She had the slenderness of a girl, but the shapeliness of a young woman. She had long legs and long arms, and long hair tied in a braid; but in her eyes there was a remarkable expression, profound and uncanny, as if not of this world.

"No! She'll never learn her multiplication table!" thought Cezary.

At their insistent request that she not interrupt her playing, Miss Wanda stood white as a sheet. She twisted to the side as if she were standing before her arithmetic teacher and twiddled her fingers in a manner indicating the final collapse of intelligence. Cezary felt sorry for the young thing. He remembered that every day he and his mother had played music for four hands, and he had had any number of music lessons.

He suggested to the young lady that together they could play Liszt's "Hungarian Dances"—a piece he still remembered well. She agreed with a nod of the head, since she was unable to utter a word however hard she tried. They sat down and played. And as soon as they began, this shrinking violet recovered not only power over herself, but also took control over the unknown gentleman—not to mention the fact that in their recital of the piece she took the lead. Her face altered, took on life, lit up, and became beautiful. Whenever she turned to her playing companion, a curious glint, a gleam of higher intelligence, one might have said: musical genius, flared in her eyes. All the occupants of the house came into the drawing room and, taking comfortable seats here and there, listened to the fine, bravura performance. This pre-prandial gathering was brought to an end

by Maciejunio, whose bows and delicate nods undoubtedly indicated that "the soup tureens were on the table." Miss Wanda pulled her fingers from the keys, stood up obediently and, curtsying comically, left the room without a word.

*

It turned out that Miss Karolina Szarłatowicz's indisposition was fortunately not so dire as to prevent the "sick woman" from sitting down to lunch with everyone else. Not only did she sit with them, she also occupied herself in a most impetuous manner with the delivery of the dishes. Toward Cezary Baryka alone she was unrestrainedly proud and supercilious. She did not look his way once, and if her face happened to turn in his direction, her eyelids lowered over her eyes. It was and must remain a mystery how, with her eyes so tight shut, she managed to notice his bow and return it with a truly monarchical nod of the head. Cezary wished to clear up this awkward situation, and so did not permit himself the slightest smile. He cheerfully told the company about the wagonette ride and the visit to Leniec, and deliberately made fun of himself riding on the speeding carriage, precisely so as to direct the mockery toward his own person. None of this did the trick. Miss Szarłatowicz received all his efforts in this regard with a nose so high in the air and with such twisted lips that it seemed his story must have contained some particularly disagreeable smell. At a certain moment Cezary Baryka found himself thoroughly astonished. Just as he was

The Coming Spring

attempting in a most altruistic fashion to spare the young lady and entertain the company at his own expense, the young lady in question, finding herself at a given moment next to the dresser and thus behind the backs of all those at the table, looked at the narrator and stuck out a tongue of such extraordinary length that it almost reached her waist. This polemical measure undertaken by Miss Karolina was so very brief that Cezary wondered whether he had not in fact experienced a temporary hallucination. His doubt was all the stronger because the tone of Miss Szarłatowicz's utterances was as eloquent and dignified as if one were listening to a queen speaking from her throne or a graduation address by the headmistress of some girls' boarding school (with full accreditation).

But everything would have gone more or less smoothly, were it not for Father Anastazy's confounded fondness for singing. Taking his coffee cup and pouring out a certain pink-hued accompaniment in a small glass, the priest hummed his tiresome:

*Caroline, Caroline,
Prends ton chapeau fleuri,
Ta robe blanche...*

At the sound of these words—"ta robe blanche..."—Cezary, taking revenge at the extrusion of a tongue so red it could have served as a Bolshevik flag, gave a brutish smile. At that point the young woman went as red as a dozen Bolshevik banners and majestically, at a slow and fluid step left the room.

"Where are you off to, Karusia?" asked the priest concernedly.

"Miss Karolina doesn't like that song," Cezary whispered in the priest's ear.

"Really? Then I won't sing another bar! My lips are sealed! But why doesn't she like it? It's such an innocent, cheerful tune—you know, Czarus—cheerful..."

"Innocent it may be, but she doesn't like it—that *Caroline, Caroline...*"

"I'll go after her. I have to apologize! A fine cousin I am!..."

When the priest returned to the table with Miss Karolina, Hipolit was already proposing a new outing after lunch to allow Cezary to see something of the neighborhood. The priest, Miss Karolina, and Cezary were to come, but not on the crazy wagonette, but a more stately britzka, while Hipolit would accompany them on horseback on his favorite bay Uryś. Father Anastazy was delighted at the prospect, Cezary too, while Miss Karolina unwound a turn or two and condescended to smile in feigned moderation. Before lunch had reached its final conclusion in liqueurs, the dispositions were made, and at the moment when everyone rose together from the table, the britzka pulled up in front of the verandah. Jędrek himself was driving an irreproachable pair of black horses, cleaned and scrubbed, in gleaming, oiled harnesses. The britzka had clearly been freshly painted, for every spoke and mud-guard, the side panels, the yellow-lacquered wicker bodywork, the seats—all gleamed from bright, recently dried paint. Jędrek held the reins and whip in his hands

The Coming Spring

the way an officer holds his sword on parade in the presence of his commander; his eyes did not leave Hipolit, who passed from detail to detail as he gave the equipage a merciless inspection. Yet the master's unforgiving eye could not find anything wrong—the britzka and harness, the groomed horses—in a word, everything—glittered and shone. And Jędreka's gaze expressed a proud and victorious word:

“Abbsolutely!”

The horses alone were a masterpiece of care. They were a pair of geldings, black as the darkest velvet. These horses had been kept for years in a darkened stable with the shutters closed and the door open only at night. Each of them was constantly being cleaned, combed, and brushed. Before the Bolshevik War Hipolit would drop by the stable unannounced, and with the corner of a white handkerchief wrapped around his finger would test to see whether he could find a trace of dust on his treasured ones. The horses grew wild in the darkness, becoming unaccustomed to the light. Their coats, short and glossy, black as a starless night, in their sheen and softness recalled the silky fur of the mole.

A stable boy led out the bay Uryś for the “young master”; it sported a light saddle and a monogrammed caparison. In the presence of his mother and his aunts and uncle, the young man mounted Uryś with impeccable grace and adroitness. It was masterful horsemanship—his first opportunity after so many months of infantry marches.

“Hipek! Please, please be careful...” whispered his mother, who was more afraid that he might fall out of

the saddle in his own courtyard than a month before, when she hadn't even known whether the savage enemy was not chopping him to pieces or dragging him across the fields behind their horses.

Hipolit reassured his mother with a loving glance and waited for the company.

First to run out was the priest, wearing a considerably shorter cassock and a decorous biretta. He was followed by Miss Karolina. These two first individuals assumed the seats of honor in the carriage. Cezary took the front seat, next to Jędrek, though he did not face forward but turned toward the other two. The seats were upholstered in thick gray cloth and suspended on strong leather straps fastened to the knobs of monogrammed hooks. All took their seats, and the coachman clicked his tongue several times at the black "moles"; the latter, however, had no intention of moving from where they were. They reared up, clopped their hooves in place, or tipped their heads downward, emitting short, broken-off whinnies that did not augur well. A quiet command came from Hipolit, who from his own position on horseback was gazing at his beloved equipage:

"Give the right-hand one a nudge!"

Jędrek raised a whip of virginal cleanliness, new and as yet unused in postwar times, and flicked the right-hand gelding with the knot at its tip. Both horses, thrown into a fearful agitation by the way their dignity had thus been disregarded, leapt forward so impulsively that the britzka hurtled away as if from a slingshot. Cezary, who was sitting opposite Father Anastazy, doubled over abruptly and would have struck the cleric in

The Coming Spring

the chest with his head, but instead hit an empty spot. Recovering himself, in place of two persons in the main seat Baryka saw four legs pointing skywards, two of which were black, clad in black gleaming boots and black unmentionables, and two white, in thin flesh-colored stockings that reached all the way up above the knees. These stockings were held in place on either leg by elastic garters that disappeared into inscrutable depths. Cezary realized that Miss Karolina had had her second unbecoming yet amusing misfortune in one day. In a synchronized movement she and the priest had tumbled from the swinging seat straight into the empty back of the britzka. Their four black-and-white limbs were flailing as they struggled unsuccessfully to extricate themselves from the tight place. A choral burst of laughter from those remaining on the verandah pursued them as they simply flew away, drawn by the black "moles." Cezary hurried eagerly to Miss Karolina's assistance and pulled her onto the seat. Then he hauled the ecclesiastic back to his place. The young lady was in despair. She had tears in her eyes. She kept straightening her short dress, tugging it down as far as it would go, almost to her heels, and wrapping it round her knees.

"Perhaps you could borrow some safety pins to fasten your gown below the knee?" suggested Cezary with sympathy and a willingness to be of service.

"No thank you!" retorted Miss Karolina with such fury that she seemed about to offer her thanks with a fist.

"The seats aren't fixed, and so they swing about. It could happen again."

"It won't!"

"Who can say it won't? God helps those who help themselves."

"You're not mistaken there, Mr. Czarus!" sighed the priest. "Goodness, how I banged my back! Did you, Karusia?"

"I did not!"

"We gave a fine display of our *dessous*, my child."

"Wonderful! Now we have to talk about it! This is simply vulgar!"

"It's all the same to me what the world sees under my cassock. With you it's another matter!" murmured the cleric compassionately.

"Can we please put an end to the subject, or I'll get out!" hissed Miss Karolina.

"Getting out right now would be rather hard. You'd have another fall. We've not said anything bad, my child. It would be worse not to say anything at all."

"Why are you so upset about such a natural gymnastic motion!...I don't understand..." put in Cezary.

"I'm upset and that's all there is to it! Ever since you arrived you've been my *porte-malheur*¹⁹!"

"Well, that's not good! If such really is the case, there's nothing for it but for me to take my things and leave!"

"Now look what you've gone and said, Karolina!"

"I didn't say anything terrible."

¹⁹ Bringer of bad luck (Fr.).

The Coming Spring

"I forbid you to talk that Ukrainian sorcery of yours, while you, Mr. Czaruś, I forbid to speak of leaving."

"Who's saying anything about Mr. Baryka leaving?" asked the young lady, gazing at them with her lovely pale blue eyes.

Hipolit was following right behind the carriage on Uryś, and it was plain to see that he was relishing the ride. He was smiling and lost in reverie. He kept patting the horse on the neck and rump, and stroking its mane affectionately. Cezary had his face before him the whole time, and the thought occurred to him that here he was, blustering about in the britzka and threatening to depart, when it really would be a huge pity to have to leave this Nawłóć. He still hadn't seen it properly! He himself seemed somehow to have grown smaller and simpler here, almost to have become a child again. Just as in the long-gone days of his childhood, once again everything here had become so curious, unfamiliar, and extraordinary! Every hill and gully they passed seemed from first glance to be somehow familiar, close, a permanent part of him, despite the fact that it was new and unknown. He was burning with curiosity to stand up in this solemnly oiled carriage and look all around, to see, to penetrate what there is further on, beyond the sparse woods that bordered the wet, root-strewn road.

They passed few people on foot. A poor Jew with a filthy sack on his back bowed low to the lord of the manor, who had not merely returned from the war but, it was said, had won the war single-handed, and had given Trotsky himself a thorough hiding. A moment later the Jew was left far behind.

But Cezary, whose eyes were still on him while the others were facing the opposite direction, continued to think of him. How he would have liked to go with that little Jew and talk about the mysteries of the latter's life, which Cezary did not know and had not seen, just as he did not know and had not seen this neighborhood, cut in two by a country road! The mystery of his life...And to talk about the contents of the sack that the other man carried so agonizingly on his back. It probably contained a few pounds of potatoes for his throng of children, who were waiting, longing for something to eat. We know that, we know it...We know what it is to long for food! Maybe he's bringing two big loaves of sour rye bread, which tastes hellish good when the stomach and the bowels are empty. We know that, we know it... Maybe the sack contains boots stolen from some peasant, which are then sold several villages away so the owner will never ever recognize them. Who can know? Who can fathom the machinations of a country Jew? One way or another, he bears his burden, plodding through mud and sand, traipsing and thrashing along the ancient roads of the land. He traipses across the earth bent under his burden at the same time as an aeroplane speeds from Warsaw to Paris amid the clouds and above the clouds, carrying an elegant lady who shortens the distance between the air stations of Warsaw and Prague by sleeping soundly in her cabin. Oh, the wretchedness, the wretchedness of a poor, dirty Jew—who can find words to describe it!

The britzka passed two old peasants walking barefoot with baskets over their arms. Their feet splashed

The Coming Spring

through the cold puddles, stirring up the caked mud. They were talking with one another. Fiercely, loudly, shouting at each other. The racing britzka made little impression on them. They barely interrupted their conversation for a short moment. Oh, how interesting it would be—no!—and how happy he would have been, to jump down from that shining, sparkling cabriolet, take off his shoes, stomp through the mud and enter into conversation with those two, to help them figure out in their foolish way how to raise themselves from their affliction, showering abuse on the mayor of the village, the village clerk, the local landowners, the way the world is organized—to shout a little and take a little vengeance!...To go with those two down a road littered with drudgery and obstacles, chilling the feet, the knees, and the joints all the way to the empty stomach, and wearying their aging bones! Cezary called out silently to those ancient peasants, who had been left far, far behind on the bumpy road:

“Hey you, people! Listen to me! I’m going to walk with you!”

In reality he was not walking but riding, comfortably, luxuriously, swiftly, racing by pasturage and copses, across fields, and down fenced lanes leading to villages.

At a certain moment Jędrek made an abrupt turn and the vehicle sped like lightning along a smooth road rising between extensive meadows. The sky was soft and pale, shot through with a dusky hue, and autumnal. Its faint blue was interspersed with colorful little clouds blown along by a bracing wind. A feeling of joy, youthfulness, and health permeated each of them to an almost identi-

cal degree. Each person was humming something to themselves. It seemed that even the horses were bursting with joy. But all at once, without warning they came to a halt. Cezary turned round and saw that they had stopped in front of a gateway.

“Gate!” yelled Jędrek in a voice so loud that it alone should have made both sides of the venerable and dilapidated guardian of the farm open of their own accord.

In fact, however, a lad with a mop of flaxen hair ran up, gasping so hard he couldn’t catch his breath, and sniffing agitatedly through his pimply blue nose. The horses entered a pathless courtyard overgrown with wilting weeds and still smelling of their last exhalations. Once again the carriage came to a stop by four linden trees that were so very old one fell in love with them at first sight. Behind the lindens stood an ancient country house, with a severely misshapen black roof that sloped down over larchwood walls almost all the way to the ground. All around there were new farm outbuildings, with decent, solid stone-built columns. Hipolit jumped down from his horse, Father Anastazy got out of the britzka and the two of them walked toward the manor. They were met by a gentleman who was tanned the color of wholemeal bread; with his moustache and squat frame, he looked like a typical “mannidger.” Cezary asked Miss Karolina if she would also get out and go into the house.

“No,” she said indecisively. “There’s a lovely pond here. I’ll take a walk over there.”

“May I accompany you?”

The Coming Spring

“If you wish...”

They passed fences woven from fir branches that enclosed the gardens around the house, and they walked down a hill to the pond. It lay there quiet and wide and pure, beneath an autumn sky, enchanting the viewer with its bulrushes, reeds, and cattails. Far away, at the other end of the expanse of water, a broad-mouthed river flowed into it. Close by were pairs of channels made of broad logs that led the water to the undershot mill wheel.²⁰ A log footbridge crossed the channels to allow easy access from the driveway to a dike overgrown with tall grass.

The moment Miss Karolina and Cezary crossed the bridge they caught the scent of withered alder and that of the water-dwelling herbs that grew in the damp depressions beyond the dike. They came to a stop at the highest point of the dike and gazed down at the pond. It was beautiful in its colors, its extensiveness, and its tranquility. The charm of oblivion, of seclusion, of being outside the world, and of isolation from everything, smiled toward the newcomers from this self-sufficient water that was so lovely to look upon. Its unruffled surface reflected the tall alders that shaded the mill, and also the two moving figures—Karolina and Cezary. At a bend in the river, a broad arm passing among the yellow bulrushes, two mallards were blithely swimming along. Cezary was struck by the powerful impression that he knew this place, that he had seen it—that he had already

²⁰ A wheel turned by water passing underneath it.

been here before. What's more, a curious, uncanny sorrow made his heart ache at the sight of the somnolent power of this water—as if he had yearned for this place for years. “How could such a thing be possible?” he asked himself. “Was it in a dream once, dreamed so long ago that it's entirely vanished from my memory?” And it was then that through his heart there passed the strange and painful word: millpool.

“Oh,” he sighed inwardly, “that's right...Now I remember...It was exactly this kind of pond, her own ‘millpool,’ that my mother wept for all her life.”

With redoubled avidity his eyes took in this “millpool,” and he could not get enough of the sight. He gazed at the small, multicolored clouds—red ones that heralded fair weather, and purple ones bringing new autumn rains—as they sailed over the unblemished surface. At such times the water was tinted to the very bottom, becoming deep, cavernous, unplumbed, its depths filled with mystery and chasmal life. When the clouds floated off over the fields, the autumnal color of the sky once again returned to the limpid surface of the water. The dark mill was rumbling and it was impossible to converse in its vicinity. Cezary and the young lady walked along the dike, leading their perfect reflections, true to the point of comicality, across the watery deep.

“There was a pond like this where we lived in the Ukraine...,” said Miss Karolina.

“Really? Because I see in it my mother's favorite haunt. Her favorite place must have looked like this.”

“Everyone has a favorite place in their childhood. It's the homeland of the soul.”

The Coming Spring

"I don't."

"Do you like it here in Poland?"

"It's all right, though there's nothing here 'worth seeing.'"

"That's true, there isn't. Here, you know, Mr. Baryka, there's nothing on a grander scale, nothing vast."

"Don't you feel comfortable here?"

"I oughtn't to feel uncomfortable. I'm really fine here. But I was an only child in a well-to-do household; I was destined and accustomed to luxury, and now I have to provide the luxuries of strangers."

"Surely they're not strangers."

"That's true, they're not."

"Do you have any close relatives?"

"Those here—they're my father's relations."

"But what about your immediate family?"

"My immediate family perished because of the Bolsheviks."

"What do you mean? All of them?"

"My mother died of exhaustion in Warsaw, in dire poverty. My father was more fortunate—he lost his life right after he was released from prison in Kiev."

"And what about material things? Please excuse me for asking."

"Nothing. *Khot' sharom pokati*—not a jot! When mama was thrown out of our home she spent a whole year by a pond just like this one which separated our property from the local village. The poor thing lived in a peasant's cottage. She left her home all alone, with nothing but the dress she was wearing. She had no one for company but our wonderful poodle Gaga. I was in Warsaw, swanning

around the world...Gaga couldn't survive life in the cottage, going without food, getting kicked about and being driven out the house into a snowstorm in the middle of winter. He died. He showed us an example—that we should die too when we were mistreated by wicked tyrants. Mama found her way to Warsaw. Then she passed away. I'm all alone."

"Now I'm your *porte-malheur* once again—the last breath of Bolshevism."

"What a terrible thought!" she laughed, reddening right up to her forehead.

"Now that's enough! You're unnatural—quite the prude."

"Evidently I've not yet come to terms with all the rules of the world, though I've had plenty of time and not wanted for opportunities."

"Did you know that as it happens I'm also a 'victim' of the Bolsheviks?"

"You? Really? I would never have guessed. How curious!"

Under the influence of a sudden urge to be candid, Cezary began to tell of his father and mother, about his flight from Baku and his trek across Russia, about his father's death and his arrival at the Polish border. He himself felt strange and absurd, opening up to a stranger; yet he told everything with ruthless honesty. He spoke of details that only now he remembered and could see with extraordinary clarity. Never before, with no one else had he brought his family matters and personal feelings to the surface. His conversations with Gajowiec about his mother concerned only her and had

The Coming Spring

their own emotional motivation. He had never confided openly even in Hipolit Wieloslawski. Now he experienced a genuine gratification, a sort of mental relief, as he told the whole story of his past life. Miss Szarłatowicz listened in a way that encouraged him to unburden himself. She listened closely and attentively, sternly and somberly. At times harsh expressions, mostly in Russian, grated between her teeth as he recounted his father's sufferings and death. They were sitting at the far end of the dike, where it merged into high fields. Beneath them were their reflections. On the opposite bank stood the white house mantled in its fringe of ancient linden branches; it too found a perfect mirror image in the clear surface of the water.

"So do you miss your poodle Gaga or Gagi?" asked the young man after a long silence, when he had finished telling about himself.

"Do I miss him? I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"In any case I feel the way he did when the peasants threw him out into a snowstorm. I was thrown out of my home too."

"What can be done! Such is fate."

"Fate! For sure! The misfortune of being born a woman and not being able at least to take revenge on one's enemies! The misfortune of trembling for oneself, for one's womanhood, in the face of those who had the right to deprive me of all material goods—oh, and of my parents too! And that's supposed to be the law! That's supposed to be justice! Gaga the dog met a better end than my mother! You have no idea how lucky you

are to be a man! Not to be afraid for your integrity, to be spared that foolishness, that anxiety, that eternal disquiet! Oh, to be able to strike, to strike the enemy in the head with a sharp sword or a sharp dagger!”

“How vengeful you are!”

“I am vengeful. If you only knew how I felt when I read in the newspapers that they were on their way here, that they were coming to throw us out of our homes once again and murder us, to shoot us to death as they shot people near Płock simply for being members of the gentry.”

“Not just for that, but also for the fact that they were tyrants, bloodsuckers, executioners of the farm workers...”

“And if you only knew how I felt as I read in the papers that you were fighting them, crushing them, that in the Polish style you were grinding them into the dust!”

She jumped up and leaned over Cezary.

“Why on earth didn’t you pursue them further and further and further?” she asked, fixing her eyes on him.

“All the way to the Urals? And further, to Krasnoyarsk?”

“Not to the Urals or Krasnoyarsk, but to Moscow! To Moscow!” she repeated, putting everything into that one word.

“I don’t occupy myself with politics, especially here by the pond, so I’ve no idea why we weren’t sent all the way to Moscow.”

“You lacked the spirit!”

The Coming Spring

"We lacked the spirit to reinstate Gaga the poodle in his mansion in the Ukraine, which now probably houses the village school."

"To take back what was robbed!"

"Miss Szarłatowicz, what was robbed is gone forever! You have to come to terms with it. You have to come to terms with all that was done and give the old world up for lost. And make the sign of the cross over it to give it your blessing. Absolve it of its sins. Let that Polish cross stand over the crimes committed there. That's the land of Russia and those are the Russian people. We Poles have our land and our people here. We have freedom. As for marching back in there, we shouldn't even dream of it, much less think seriously about it."

"I'll never forgive you for what you said about the poodle!"

"Yes you will! We're already friends, and we'll be even closer and more open with one another."

"How can you be so sure? You've not even been a whole day in these parts, and already you're so certain!"

"Well, won't it be easier for you here—and in general everywhere—to have a special ally?"

"It would be good," she answered, turning crimson, "to have an ally like that. But is it possible to give one's trust? To a man?"

"Mistrust a man as you mistrust a dog—'civilian or soldier on campaign, he's always a dog at the end of a chain...' And I'm doubly the dog—I'm already a civilian but still a soldier."

"We shall see," she said, laughing through her embarrassment.

"In any case, for the moment let's stick together!" he said, stretching out his hand.

"Let's stick together!" she said sincerely, shaking the hand he proffered.

"Just a minute though—what's the name of this place, Miss Szarłatowicz?"

"It has an odd name. It's called Chłodek."

"There you are! Chłodek! Dear Chłodek! How I'd like to be given a position here!"

"A position? I can't imagine what kind..."

"Well, there is a mill here. So there must be a miller. I'd like the position of miller's apprentice."

"Aren't you just the little Tolstoy! 'The position of miller's apprentice,'" she said teasingly.

Now it was Cezary's turn to go bright red. He tried to recover himself by saying:

"Tolstoy has nothing to do with it! All right, not miller's apprentice. Fine! I can be bookkeeper for the steward here."

"There is no steward, only Gruboszewski the manager, and he does all the bookkeeping he needs in his scratchy handwriting; that's the way it's been for years."

"To work for Mr. Gruboszewski the manager...Then let it be for the manager. You see how flexible I am; the most easy-going fellow you ever met."

"But why does it have to be here?"

"If your mama could live for a year in a peasant's cottage, why shouldn't a strong, healthy type like me live up on that hill in a little house. Good Lord!"

"What on earth would you do here? Agitate?"

The Coming Spring

“No agitation! When the time comes they’ll agitate one another best of all. What patient folk they are! But the moment will come when reason will enter into them. Reason will barge in through the doors and windows of their cottages and hovels. Agitation isn’t my business. My father forbade me to agitate by telling me certain legends.”

“Then what would you do?”

“I’d like to get to know the people round here. To see everything with my own eyes. The simple folk. Peasants, Jews, workers, tradesmen, fishermen; the hard-working ones and the rascals, the good and the bad, the wise ones and the fools. I’d want to talk to them about their lives. To spend time with them!”

“That’s a strange thing to want to do!”

“Maybe it is, but how can I help it! Such is my nature. I’d make a fine bookkeeper, I swear. The whole day I’d do what I was told. Then in the evening, after sunset, when all the work was done, I’d enjoy sitting here, or over there beneath the lindens, and gazing down at this wide, wide water lit up by the moon or illuminated by the stars—at this ‘millpool’—and in my solitude I’d reminisce about my mother...Reminisce about my mother...,” he sang softly to himself, as if his companion were not sitting next to him at all.

His head resting on his hands, he gazed at the water. Miss Karolina stared at him closely out of the corner of her eye.

Father Anastazy and Hipolit Wielosławski had just appeared on the dike and were coming toward the other two as they sat plunged in silence.

*

In the end Cezary Baryka never did assume the position of bookkeeper at the possession known in the kingdom of Nawłóć as Chłodek. The reason was not some sort of fashionable “cost-cutting” but was the fault of the applicant himself. He withdrew his candidacy. When he first brought up the idea with Hipolit Wielosławski, the latter was for a moment rendered speechless, dumbstruck even. It was only after a moment that he began to ask questions:

“Bookkeeper? A bookkeeper? At Chłodek? You? A student? Of medicine? Why? What for? *Cui bono?*²¹”

Cezary explained that he had come to visit his friend for a few days, and that he had taken such a liking to the place that he would like to stay here for some time. And he couldn’t just become a permanent house guest, an “elderly aunt,” living at the family’s expense and idling his time away. He was drawn, he said, to human life, to the simple life. He’d like to get to know it directly, in its essence, not at second hand, not from the step of a carriage or the stirrups of the master’s horses. He’d like to talk face to face with the people hereabouts. But not just talk. He’d like to work side by side with them, since he was here, because you couldn’t talk with a work-weary man unless you were toiling with him shoulder to shoulder.

Hipolit understood the last arguments and accepted them completely. But he could not comprehend the idea of living at Chłodek. It was absurd, Russian somehow, quite impossible.

²¹ For whose good? (Latin.)

The Coming Spring

“Here in Poland,” he explained, “you simply can’t do that, because our people would just laugh at the idea. It’s Tolstoyan or whatever—a pose, a stratagem, humbug—there was a lot of humbug in all those renunciations of Tolstoy’s. Here you can do anything you fancy, but only on condition that you don’t make yourself look ridiculous. If you did something like this, I’d be a laughing-stock here in my own parish...I mean, just think about it, Czarus: the bookkeeper at Chłodek is my close friend...Dammit! It’s like something from the cabaret...There’s something false about it. We Poles are an ancient race; we won’t tolerate any of those Russian experiments, their falsehoods, their discoveries and their humbug. We had our own Tolstoys—but true in spirit—in the sixteenth century.²² Admit it, friend—you wouldn’t be a real bookkeeper earning a modest living through honest hard work, but a young master from the city who’s amusing himself, flirting with communism and playing at being a bookkeeper, while on Sundays he puts his young master’s clothes back on and spends time again with the children of the lord of the manor...Besides, you’d take the place of an actual bookkeeper, who desperately wants the position, since he has no livelihood. There’s something laughable about it all, Czarus!...”

Cezary had to acknowledge that there was logic in such reasoning. He yielded to this logic—which, it must be said openly, was little more than parochial snob-

²² A reference to the Arians (see footnote 15 above).

bery—and retracted his application. Besides, he did not have a single free moment to devote to his bookkeeping fantasy. The lunches, dinners, breakfasts, and afternoon teas lasted virtually all day long. People rose rather late. They had barely finished breakfast and given free rein to a discussion arising from a chance topic, when Maciejunio was already tiptoeing in with his own concerns, and the table, which had only just been cleared, was being covered with a fresh tablecloth. This meant that the society of Nawłóć was about to have lunch. An excursion on horseback or by carriage, a brief caper—back home—and one was already being told off for being late to lunch.—Lunch.—Black coffee with a drop of orange-flavored island *Curaçao*; cigarettes...The table was being cleared again. The company would begin to split up, form smaller groups, and eventually head toward their afternoon naps, while Maciejunio was already mumbling to himself and ordering the boy to lay the table. A drop of white coffee, tea—in a word, *five o'clock tea*,²³ with slices of rye bread and wheat bread and that indescribable fresh butter, and with the shortbread cakes whose fame had spread far beyond the boundaries of the kingdom of Nawłóć, and which were the unquestionable *spécialité de la maison*. After coffee a short ride, a trip to the local town of Ostropust or a little music in the drawing room, since Wanda Okszyńska had appeared; a little dancing, if someone happened to drop by for a late afternoon visit. And then Maciejunio was bus-

²³ In English in the original.

The Coming Spring

ting and clattering about once again. Dinner was on its way. Maciejunio would wink and in a low whisper would let Father Anastazy in on the secret: “lamb,” or: “chicken—on the spit.” After dinner there would be a game of chess with Father Anastazy, a round of vint,²⁴ (the two aunts, mama, and the priest, or mama, the priest, Hipolit and Cezary)—then it was eleven o’clock or half-past...It would have been a sorry affair to go to sleep without a light snack before bed to fortify them. Maciejunio would toddle in hurriedly, bringing home-made sheep’s cheeses, imported tangy green apples of exceptional quality, or some other autumn delicacies—and tiny little glasses containing something made from dark cherries...In a word, a modest “pre-rooster” snack before the first cock-crow.

After spending a day and an evening in this way, it often happened that the autumn morning had long passed yet the downstairs quarters of the Arianka were still plunged in a profound silence. The outside door leading to the garden was locked and the shutters closed, while from the inside there came the sound of military and clerical snores. Father Anastazy excelled at this passive occupation. The old man from the church at Nawłóć Dolna had long been waiting in front of the house to accompany the “reverend father” across the fields for the morning mass; Jędrek had long been waiting with Uryś all saddled up; Maciejunio had long been worrying that the first dishes would get cold, and the skin on the

²⁴ A Russian card game, similar to bridge and whist.

cream would be burned. Under their ecclesiastical leadership, the snores rose to the high ceilings and shook the ancient walls.

In such cases Miss Karolina took desperate steps. She would gather rocks in the garden—erratic boulders, nuggets, and half-rounded chunks from the Oligocene, the Miocene, and the Pliocene. She moved these formations closer to the seat of Arianism, a considerably newer creation yet one that was now even more thoroughly extinct—and she hurled the prehistoric remnants of the Tertiary period at the locked portal. Each impact from the mighty lumps of mineral sent a massive echo reverberating round the walls and ceiling of the large and lofty entrance hall. The sleeping warriors had the impression that a heavy artillery bombardment was just beginning, accompanied by a thundering volley from an entire battery of cannon, and that a moment later there would be a frontal attack by the enemy. Father Anastazy would sit bolt upright, then fall down again so as to emit two or three more snores that were truly not only unchristian and unlaical, but thoroughly Beelzebubian in character. But since the onslaught of rocks did not abate, but on the contrary the malicious young woman continued hurling her projectiles at the castle gate, all three of them woke up and gazed contentedly at the white ceilings, which were in no danger whatsoever of collapsing about their sleep-filled heads. From somewhere near the window came the sorrowful buzzing of the last spiteful fly of autumn, which had been kept alive by the warmth indoors. The soldiers gradually realized that they were not in a foxhole and not at war, but in a

The Coming Spring

room, and furthermore a dear, longed-for room with a high whitewashed ceiling...

"Aha—breakfast'll be soon! What's the weather like? Is it raining? How should we ride on our trip after breakfast—on horseback or in the two-wheeler?" Father Anastazy would beat his breast and in Latin entreat forgiveness for such a dire, shameful neglect of his duties in God's service. He would wash with one hand and comb his hair with the other, fling on his long-coated attire any which way and then rush out of the house as fast as possible and dash directly across the fields toward the Nawłóć church, without even waiting for the aged sexton.

In between one meal and the next Cezary Baryka frequently gave free rein to his mania for what he called getting to know the truth and essence of life. He would slip away to the barns and take part in the huge job of threshing the corn with the horse-driven threshing machines; he would sit in the granary or in the stables and cattle sheds, or hang about as the potato clamps were being filled or the cabbages being shredded. At this time the great barns were thrown wide open. The machines turned by the horses in the treadmill were rattling away, and the wind swirled the husks and the chaff, blowing up veritable dust-storms. Endless amounts of straw lay all about from the threshing. Those driving the horses shouted, and the laborers spoke at the top of their voices to make themselves heard over the rumble of the machine. Yet above all the crashing and grinding and shouting there rose the eternally cheerful singing of the girls gathering the straw.

This also happened to be the time when the entire distinguished society of the “palace” along with the most demure aunts and Mrs. Wielosławska herself clambered up to the attic of the manor to segregate the apples. In the attic there were special partitions, like the mows in a barn, that long ago had been lined with clay and coated with chaff. Masses of apples were taken up there as they ripened in the extensive orchards that lay on either side of the entrance driveway. The apples were of different varieties, though all had originated from seedlings of the most excellent quality. The attic was large and had rather high ceilings, and was airy and dry; it was delightfully warm and was filled with the truly angelic scent of ripe apples. The company gathered there ostensibly to segregate the fruit and place the best specimens in the appropriate partitions; but in fact they occupied themselves with consuming those best specimens in utterly excessive amounts. The priest, Hipolit, Cezary, Uncle Skalnicky, even the frail, withered old aunts, and even Mrs. Wielosławska herself—in a word, everyone—applied a kind of apple-based course of treatment to themselves up in that space. Furthermore, as they sat about up there they shed something of the shell in which they moved about formally in the drawing room or dining room. In those upper reaches they threw apples at one another, chased about and frolicked like children, or rather like a pack of loft rats.

During these games in the attic, and the chasing and leaping among the full partitions and the piles of apples, it happened that Cezary would catch Miss Karolina, seize her and hold her in his arms. Once it even oc-

The Coming Spring

curred that he held her considerably longer than circumstances and the rights of the victor permitted—and it also happened that his lips grazed her cheek, which was as rosy and fresh as the most lovely and fragrant apple. After this last incident there were sour faces and poutings that lasted several hours—"I really have no wish to talk to you, sir"—but there also eventually came a pardon, on condition of significant improvement in the future.

All these tasks and, if one can call them that, occupations that took Cezary by surprise in Nawłóć were nothing in comparison with the work that Mrs. Kościeniecka imposed upon him. As was mentioned, the widow-fiancée of Leniec was organizing a huge picnic to raise funds to buy prosthetic limbs for the cripples left armless and legless as a result of the war. The picnic was to take place in the drawing rooms of the largest mansion in the district—Odolany, the property of elderly Mr. Storzán, who, himself struck down by paralysis, wanted to be at least of some service to his "fellow cripples." He allowed the organizers to do what they wished in his rooms, in which the drapes were permanently drawn and the moths flew about at will. Since Mr. Storzán was an invalid and an old bachelor living by the grace of his nurses and servants, he was naturally unable to take care of anything himself, and so Mrs. Kościeniecka took control of the drawing rooms of Odolany like an old mother hen, making all the preparations for an outstanding festivity. She set the entire neighborhood in motion, mobilizing any living thing that had legs and a tail coat, and ruled the young folk like a dictator merciful

to the obedient but implacable with the sluggish. Since it was to be a picnic by subscription, and since a great number of people were to attend, supplies of every kind had to be amassed. And so Mrs. Kościeniecka drove round the mansions, manors, and country houses, collecting all the best cured meats and emptying out cellars. The entire area baked, fried, and cooked under the command of the lovely widow of Leniec.

It went without saying that the hostess-general required assistants. Her principal aide was her fiancé Mr. Barwicki. But there were also secondary helpers, among them Hipolit Wielosławski and Cezary Baryka. The latter fell into the clutches of the widow-fiancée and had to dance to whatever tune she played. But this would-be dancer had a certain organic flaw that was unforgivable in such circumstances: he did not possess a tail coat. Wielosławski knew about this shortcoming, and so one fine afternoon, after a forceful preliminary attack with artillery shells and a thundering cannonade of the heaviest and most well-directed arguments, Hipolit Wielosławski effected an all-out attack—he asked his friend virtually on bended knee to accept from him a tail coat with appurtenances as a symbol, memento, and sign of their brotherhood. He appealed to their common bunk in the trenches, the bread and lard they had divided between them, the lice and bedbugs they had shared; he appealed to the Rogacz Woods near Patków Pruski; this strapping fellow and mighty landowner even wept copious tears. Cezary agonized for quite some time over his ultimate moral downfall, till in the end he waved a dismissive hand at himself and acceded. Together they

The Coming Spring

raced over to Częstochowa and ordered a coat from the local representative of Pool & Co, who dressed Hipolit—and one sunny fall morning an express messenger arrived at Nawłóć with a finished coat, a shirt in the latest style, and the most modish accessories.

At the time Cezary was not at home but was out and about somewhere. When he returned to his room before lunch, on the table he saw the tail coat and the other elements of his ball outfit, and furthermore a shirt that was now his, but had been ironed in a truly masterful manner. There were also collar and cuffs and a white tie he had not ordered in town. The tie was exquisite—the most fashionable kind, not the shop-bought sort. And when Baryka began to make inquiries among the servants to find out who the devil had been poking about in his room and leaving various items of clothing, it transpired that Miss Karolina had put everything there and set it out on the table, and that in general it was she who oversaw the laundry in the manor. Cezary once again wrung his hands at the thought of his final collapse, his abasement, and his wearing of other people's coats and ties; but nevertheless he was moved at the young lady's thoughtfulness and decided to thank her at the first opportunity.

He did not have to wait long for a chance to express his gratitude for such a wonderfully ironed shirt front, collar, and cuffs. The same afternoon he was just trying on the coat in his room and, not without a certain gratification, was prancing about in front of the mirror and assuming the most elegant poses, when he heard Miss Karolina singing as she came down the stairs from the

apartment of the steward Mr. Turzycki and his wife. He swiftly opened his door and appeared to the young woman in his tail coat. She gave a cry of admiration and examined him from every side, declaring him just as handsome as one of the male models in *Die Dame*.²⁵ Cezary found this hard to believe and asked her to come into his room, since he had something interesting to tell her. Looking left and right, she crossed the threshold on tiptoe. But the door had barely closed when Cezary pointed at the accessories lying on the table and in a menacing voice asked who had dared to press his collars? She confessed timidly and fearfully that it was her doing. And at this point the punishment was meted out right away. Cezary seized her in his embrace and danced several steps of the shimmy with her in front of the mirror. Miss Karolina whispered that someone might hear them making a racket—that someone might come in, and then she would be ruined. They would see her alone with him, in his room...Oh!...It was to no avail. They danced, on tiptoe to be sure, but till they were fit to drop.

And when she went on and on about that ruin of hers, her lost reputation, and almost her virtue—he closed her chattering lips with a kiss that was long enough to stop the chattering, to prevent anyone from overhearing the conversation and “maybe” bringing about her ruin. At this point she finally fell silent. She fell silent for a long moment of oblivion, of the kind

²⁵ A German illustrated magazine.

The Coming Spring

that makes the heart stop out of insatiable pleasure, and the world recede into the distance. But then Miss Karolina came out of her rapture. With strong elbows she pushed the persistent fellow away and ended the kiss. With eyes closed, she whispered:

“Don’t ruin me! Don’t do anything bad to me!”

“Bad? Was that bad?”

“Please, sir...I beg you with all my heart...Don’t ruin me!”

“Oh, that ‘ruining’ of yours! Ruin...”

Yet he collected himself and let go of her.

“You can go, you awful miser...But before you do...One last time...Right here by the door...”

Karusia could not resist. If only he would let her go...Her smile became radiant despite herself, and lips found their way to lips of their own accord. A long moment went by as that half-hour leavetaking continued. At last she broke away, bowed her head and quietly opened the door. She left. Cezary heard her pass through the main door and run out into the garden. His body filled with happiness, as if the kiss given from lips to lips was now circulating through all his veins and glowing in the marrow of his bones.

He looked out the window. No one was about. He thought:

“Oh, the shrew! There’s no one there. We could have kissed for half an hour more at least. Another opportunity won’t come along for ages.”

But he was seriously mistaken. There was someone who had closely observed that chance rendezvous and seen the kisses clearly. It was the young musician Miss

Wanda Okszyńska. When Karolina had left the apartment of her uncle and aunt, the pianist had slipped down the stairs after her, not for the purpose of spying but for the relief of her heart.

Though Miss Wandzia did not yet hold the multiplication table in her undivided possession, in particular at random, she had already been struck by Cupid's arrow. The moment she saw Cezary Baryka the aforementioned projectile hit its mark. A mute and electrifying shudder told her—this was the one! And when Cezary sat down next to her to play the piece for four hands, raging love—a veritable volcano—erupted in Miss Wandzia's heart. Expelled from school and driven out of her own home, she had no idea that among "grown-ups" that was precisely what it was called—love. Miss Wandzia simply fell sick at heart. She existed in a state of continual longing that at times quite took away her mental powers. The young lady dwelt in a kind of azure-hued fog. The person of Cezary grew hazy and almost dissolved in a gentle trailing cloud. The sacred places where he spent his time possessed their own fragrance of violets or roses—and their own special melody, which however could never be captured or played. When he was not there, when he had gone out or gone away somewhere, the world became empty, barren, hollow, desolate, odious, filled with darkness and tedium. There was no force that could have turned Miss Wanda's thoughts and feelings in a different direction. There was no prohibition capable of changing or withstanding her yearning. She was afraid to the point of terror of actually seeing her ideal, while every moment of Cezary's pres-

The Coming Spring

ence and of conversation with him became a new impulse to dream about him, to dream constantly, day and night. His voice, heard in the distance, sounded in her ear like a singular melody.

She often tried to convert, to translate into music, the sound of his voice, joyful or gloomy; and she often played something for herself that no one else could understand. She heard him in various musical works that she performed, or she lost sight of him in the music and had to seek him out there again. At such times curious musical voices called to her, leading her to unattainable heights and, once at these high places, thrilling her heart with profound emotion. Striking a physical key opened as it were a great interior in the azure cloud. She entered the beyond and was borne on the embrace of a mist that wiped the streams of tears from her solitary eyes.

Miss Wanda guarded her secret religiously. She had long known that she would have to die from the incomprehensible sickness she had fallen prey to at the sight of the stranger. She knew she would die because of this gentleman, and she dreamed only that one distant day he would come to her grave and sit by the mound of earth—only for a minute! She was moved to the utter limits of nervous endurance by this scene, in which she was lying in the ground, hideously disfigured, while he sat by her tomb. The moon shone. It was the middle of the night. A nightingale was singing in the cemetery lilacs. She watered that freshly-formed mound with torrents of the most sincere and genuine tears.

When Cezary was in his room downstairs, humming to himself or laughing as he conversed with Father An-

astazy or Hipolit, Miss Wanda would tiptoe down the stairs to the hallway and, squeezing into a recess in the thick old Arian wall, she would listen in rapture. Golden scales of divine music, ascents to heaven and plunges into the abyss, were born and formed at such times in her soul. She would sometimes listen enraptured as he snored, now loudly, now softly. Life in the Turzyckis' apartment—which revolved around the kitchen, where Miss Wanda's kindly aunt conducted the usual quarrels and discussions with the servants while her worthy uncle was away visiting the manor—all this left a vast amount of time for Miss Wandzia's feelings to take shape. No one paid any attention to her as she slipped out into the courtyard or onto the stairs and loitered in the hall. No one could hinder her from planting an ecstatic kiss on the handle of the door leading to Cezary's room, or from pressing herself against that door while he was gone, almost dying of happiness and at the same time of despair.

And on that day too, when Miss Karolina Szarłatowicz had exchanged kisses with Cezary a lot or a little, Wanda Okszyńska had slipped down the stairs like a specter, like a wraith, to give herself over to her secret mania. From her alcove on the landing the young musician heard Miss Karolina talking with "him," and saw her go into that room...Driven by uncontrollable feelings, more quietly and nimbly than the most agile cat, Miss Wanda crept up to Cezary's door and through the keyhole she saw the dancing and the kisses. Oh, what terrible flames flared up, raged, and subsided in her breast! She thought she would not be able to stand it,

The Coming Spring

that she would start to hammer on the door with her fists, shout to high heaven, pull out her hair and run away into the distance...But she did none of these things. Held back by a mysterious instinct, she fled to her recess on the stairs and, huddling between the sympathetic walls, she watched Miss Szarłatowicz leave Baryka's room. At this time her reason ceased operating, eclipsed by a black fog, and only the stormwinds of her emotions raged through her being.

At some unknown moment she hauled herself back upstairs as if each foot weighed a ton. She sat down and opened a book. Now she had fathomed out why it was that Cezary never looked at her, never talked with her as he did with other people, and when he did happen to glance at her, he would immediately give an ill-natured smile. It was the first time Miss Wanda had seen people kissing one another, but in a bizarre way she understood perfectly what it meant. It was truly unfortunate that she had to see such a poor example! The sight had struck her like a spear thrown by the devil himself, and had become embedded in her breast like a three-cornered spearhead that nothing could dislodge. She closed her eyes tight and felt she was wasting away, dying, from what she had seen. She stuffed a handkerchief in her mouth to stop herself from howling and screaming as the image kept repeating before her eyes.

*

The date of the picnic was approaching rapidly, and not everything was yet ready. Time and again a messen-

ger from Mrs. Laura Kościeniecka would hurry to Nawłóć with orders: go here, take such and such, or gallop at top speed on horseback to the town on certain indispensable errands. Off would rush Hipolit, or Cezary, or sometimes both together.

One autumn afternoon Baryka had delivered a box of candies to Odolany on the instructions of Mrs. Kościeniecka, when torrential rain prevented him from being able to return to Nawłóć. The horses that had delivered him and his "goods" to the mansion at Odolany had been sent off to a neighboring manor, also on picnic business. Cezary was waiting for them to come back. The invalid Mr. Storzán was having a bad day and was not about; his nurse-cum-housekeeper kept the young man company only for a certain time. Her duties "summoned her" to Mr. Storzán's sickbed. Cezary remained alone in the drawing room, which was as dark and somber as the house of a dying person. He had already studied all the paintings and engravings on the walls and had leafed through all the albums with pictures by various old masters; he hummed and strolled about the carpet, which was as large as a town square and soft as the lawn in the middle of such a square. The wind blew, rattling the windows. It was almost as black as night, though daylight still hung over the earth. The horses were nowhere to be seen. The young man was uncommonly bored. It would not have been right to fall asleep, though he was feeling drowsy. It would not have been right to go into the other rooms, yet he was heartily sick of the drawing room. "Nevertheless" Cezary decided to risk it. He entered the adjoining study, and then cracked

The Coming Spring

open the door to the ballroom. It was immense, freshly waxed, and decorated with Chinese lanterns made from (“fabulous”) colored batiks. The nosy fellow crossed this room too and opened a door to a small room with a verandah which the recent rain had thoroughly soaked—and, going down a few concrete steps, he went into the garden. But the rain was lashing down, so he retreated to the house again and passed through all those magnificent chambers to the original drawing room. He was just settling down in a most comfortable armchair and had even come to terms with the idea of a nap, when the rumble of wheels was heard. At last! The horses were back.

“Now I can go,” thought Cezary, gathering his things.

Yet from the broad, splendid vestibule with its marble floor and mirrored walls came the voice of Mrs. Laura Kościeniecka. A moment later the door opened and the lady herself appeared in all her glorious beauty.

“You’re still here, Mr. Baryka?!” she exclaimed in surprise. “I thought you’d left for Nawłóć long ago...”

“Not so, to your vexation. The horses that brought me here left for Suchołustek. They were supposed to come back for me, but there’s no sign of them.”

“How scandalous! Why didn’t you request horses from here, from Odolany? A military man and he doesn’t know how to requisition things...”

“It was precisely a scandal that I was trying to avoid. I’m not a great fan of requisitioning and the methods of warfare. I was counting on the horses appearing from Suchołustek any moment now. I preferred to wait pa-

tiently. And as you can see, fate has rewarded me abundantly for my virtuousness.”

“I don’t see how fate has rewarded you in any way. But what on earth have you and your virtues been doing here, all alone in this immense hospital?”

“Getting bored. I listened to the rain.”

“You poor prisoner! Well, I don’t see anything else for it! I’ll take you back to Nawłóć.”

“I’d be very grateful, and I won’t even try to express how happy it would make me.”

“Just a moment...I’d like to rest up a short while. Do you mind?”

“Oh, Mrs. Laura...”

Lovely Mrs. Kościeniecka threw the overcoat from her shoulders, straightened her hair before the mirror and sat in an armchair. As Cezary caught the coat in midair, he was enswathed in the pervasive scent of fine, strong perfume. When he sat down opposite the widow-fiancée this fragrance, seemingly so evanescent, wrapped itself around his senses like an unseen lasso. A visible stimulus, on the other hand, were the shapely legs appearing beneath her short dress. Cezary recalled those feet and legs in thick stockings, pressed against the foam-flecked sides of a horse—legs that were well-formed and firm as steel. He closed his eyes and hid his true feelings with a predatory smile.

“What a pity,” said the beautiful lady, “that I wasn’t at home just now. The horses would have come for you long ago. I’ve been out visiting. The people hereabouts! You wouldn’t believe it! Anyway, you’ll see for yourself. We’re going to have such fun!”

The Coming Spring

“You’re looking forward to the picnic?”

“I’ll say!”

“Will you dance a lot?”

“I certainly will!”

Mrs. Kościeniecka stretched her arms in a peculiar way. Cezary looked askance at her and a nervous yawn made him stretch his whole body too.

“And will you be dancing a lot, Mr. Baryka?”

“I will! With you.”

“With me? My fiancé is awfully jealous.”

“Fiancé,” drawled Cezary. “He’ll be awfully jealous and I’ll keep dancing with you. After all, you were the one who invited me to this picnic.”

“I see that you imagine he’s only jealous in theory...”

“He can be jealous in theory or in practice; either way I’ll dance with you till we’re fit to drop. His jealousy needs something to latch onto...He needs to know what he should be jealous of!”

“We’ll see what happens at the picnic. Now it’s time to be going...,” said Mrs. Laura as she stood up.

Cezary helped her on with her overcoat, which she did not have time to button. They left the drawing room, passed into the hall, and were seen out by the butler, who brought apologies from his employer that the latter could not receive “her ladyship.” Mrs. Laura nodded and passed through the door that was held open by a footman. Outside, under the roof of the portico stood the famous carriage, with its shining bodywork and white satin-lined coach, that in the neighborhood was known as the “love carriage,” as Mr. Kościeniecki

had bought it for his wife. The rain had eased off slightly but was still drizzling in fat, abundant drops.

Mrs. Laura personally opened the door of the carriage and hopped like a bird into the white interior. Dusk was already falling and the aged driver had lit the candles in the lanterns next to the box. Invited by a polite gesture from Mrs. Kościeniecka, Cezary entered the coach. A small, soft hand helped him up the step. Without a moment's hesitation he brought the hand to his lips. And the moment the door slammed shut and the horses bounded off into the profound darkness of the avenue of lindens—driven by an uncontrollable, frenzied power, Cezary took this gorgeous woman in his arms, pressed his burning lips to hers and threw himself upon her with all the force that fury offers. She gave no cry and did not sigh as he took her unresisting and compliant into his possession.

The horses galloped down the broad sandy avenue. The light from the lanterns cast sudden glints of alarm amid the great trunks of the lindens and poplars. The carriage swayed this way and that on the uneven surface like a gentle cradle. Its black coach and mirrorlike windows with the curtains drawn cast mysterious flashes as it hurtled through the autumn night that had descended rapidly on the sodden meadows and wilting fields. In the wild surprise of ecstasy, in the danger, the rush between the fields, the rocking and the shaking there was an immensity of joy for both the chance lovers. They had gone quite mad from their sudden passion, and they dreamed of their pleasure as they lived it to the full. Their kisses and caresses were as boundless as the night,

The Coming Spring

filled with an inexhaustible power like the galloping horses that carried them into the distance.

From Odolany to Nawłóć it was about three and a half miles. Leaving the avenues of Odolany, the carriage entered open country. But how quickly, how suddenly there could be heard once more the sound of the trees along the avenue at Nawłóć! Cezary was kneeling and kissing Laura's hands. The entire madness of his love was concentrated in one question:

"Has your fiancé...?"

"Hush!" she gasped, still unable to catch her breath.

"Has your fiancé...?"

"Never! Never! Never in the world! I swear by all I hold holy..."

"Why on earth are you marrying that man? Oh, that's right... You love him..."

"Hush now!"

"Why are you marrying that man?"

"I'll explain it all to you. I'll tell you. Mr. Baryka! We're at Nawłóć already..."

The carriage circled the lawn in front of the manor and came to a stop. Cezary kissed Mrs. Laura's hand gallantly and gave a low, low bow. She did not wish to get out or to see anyone. The door slammed shut again, and again the coach crunched loudly on the gravel of the driveway around the lawn. Soon the black carriage disappeared in the dark depths of the row of ancient trees like a passionate, implausible dream.

*

A few days before the event at Odolany Mrs. Laura Kościeniecka burst into Nawłóć "like a whirlwind" on some extremely urgent piece of business concerning the ball. Among the various instructions she issued to Hipolit and Cezary, one was especially for the ear of the latter. Baryka listened carefully to this directive and responded with a wordless bow. Aha—and he also responded with a scarcely perceptible smile that thrilled both interlocutors to the marrow of their bones.

That evening after supper Cezary went to bed early, complaining of a headache. By the time Hipolit and the priest came back to the building where the guest rooms were situated, the light was out in Baryka's window. Evidently he was asleep. Not wanting to disturb him in his efforts to overcome the migraine with a refreshing sleep, both moved about quietly, walking on tiptoe and refraining from coughing.

But Cezary was not suffering so very much. Before the other two came back, he had slipped out of his room in the dark, passed through the grounds, and walked down the avenue that led along a country lane in the direction of Leniec. To Mrs. Kościeniecka's property it was perhaps two and a half miles by the main roads, but it was a lot closer if one took a short cut down that lane. Before his eyes Cezary had the distant lights of the mansion on the hilltop. It was a true autumn night, dark and damp, with an already wintry wind. But the wanderer was hot. He walked quickly, circumspectly, noiselessly. At times he would stop and listen, and at such moments, in that night he resembled a fox or a wolf stalking its prey. Moving along the edge of a wood

The Coming Spring

whose corner adjoined the lane, he reached the meadows surrounding the lake and the ponds in the dell below Leniec. He didn't dare walk down the front driveway, so he was obliged to circle the lake and march across a dike that he had only seen from a distance in the daytime. The thought crossed his mind that in these places he could be seized by some gamekeeper or nightwatchman or miller, but this notion did not stop him even for a moment in his steps. In the dense gloom the water glimmered faintly in the lake and the ponds that extended back into the dark heart of the night. Baryka stuck to the path he had chosen, which led him onto the dike. He ran swiftly across it and passed the sluice where the water flowing out of the lake murmured with a soft sound that was oddly moving at that unfamiliar place in the impenetrable blackness. Beyond the sluice and the dike the land rose. The sandy road came to a fence around the grounds that was overgrown with thorny bushes.

"And now the dogs," thought the adventurer.

But this unpleasant thought equally failed to deter him. He found a point among the sharpened pickets that was somewhat "easier," in other words quite simply a little more rotten; he grasped the top of one of the posts and with a single bound cleared the fence. He landed in some thorny raspberry or gooseberry bushes and extricated himself from them at some cost to his clothing, emerging onto a broad well-trodden path. His mind was wondering if his feet were not leaving too visible a trail. And so he walked up the rising path on tiptoe. He was hot—let it be said clearly and plainly—

from fear. It was with considerable relief that he felt his knee strike against a garden bench. He sat down and listened intently. No dogs could be heard nearby. Through the strange, almost delirious rush of his thoughts, or rather as a result of a series of rushing impulses and emotions, he had the illusion that he was in Baku during the Turkish siege. He was in danger from something. Something was lurking in that mute, dense, stonelike darkness. Something was lying in wait. Through the already leafless branches the lighted windows of Mrs. Kościeniecka's mansion could be seen.

Cezary brought to mind the time he had spent with her, enchanting and filled with a devilish pleasure; and he leapt up from the bench. Virtually hurtling along, he ran to the corner of the building which had been indicated to him in the secret conversation. There he came upon a flight of concrete steps leading up to a door. He knew that the door would not be locked. And indeed he opened it, depressing the handle as lightly and quietly as he possibly could. The door swung open slowly and silently. This door, open to the garden and fields, was his first accomplice. Oh, what exquisite pride he felt as he entered the dark hallway! Reaching out his arms on both sides, he touched the walls. In one of them, light was seeping through an opening. He guessed that there must be a door there. He quickly put his eye to the keyhole and looked about the deserted room. It was the library in which he had been received the day after he had first arrived in those parts. He stood for a long time at the door, wondering whether to go in at this moment. If a servant were to enter the brightly lit room to turn off

the light, what then? Or perhaps it was deliberate, and no servant would enter the room? Someone from the house could also come along the hallway...

Counting on blind chance and lover's luck he pressed down on the handle he had already found and was gripping. Without a sound he entered the lighted room. In a single bound he crossed the entire room, all the way to a broad ottoman that stood in its darkest corner. There he sprawled comfortably. He picked up a book that was lying there and began to read at the place where it lay open. Admittedly he did not fully understand what he was reading, but for quite some time his eyes passed over the lines on the page from top to bottom. Now he was completely calm: he had come to Mrs. Kościeniecka on urgent and important business in connection with the ball. He waited placidly. Somewhere far away, upstairs, he heard voices conversing—there was laughter—it was a woman's laugh. But also a man's. Two women and a man.

"Barwicki," he muttered to himself, almost aloud. "Barwicki's here," he announced to himself.

He lost all his high spirits. Not out of fear, but out of hatred. In the first instance he decided to get up, leave the way he had come in, and take off back to Nawłóć. He gave a vulgar curse, just like in Baku, at the port. He hesitated. But he was held back by his comfortable seat on the sofa, and the possibility of emerging more or less honorably from this awkward, half-thievish situation. He read, bursting with anger, furious and squirming like a fox caught in a trap, like a wolf in a snare. It seemed to him that he had been sitting there for a whole hour, if not longer. He had read ten pages of the book or more, without understand-

ing a single sentence. He had shifted in his seat, assuming positions that were ever comfier, ever less cowardly and ever more debonair, easy, and graceful. Oh, how he would have enjoyed taking a stroll up and down the room.

Suddenly he heard the door to the upstairs part of the mansion opening; the steps creaked as several people came downstairs. There came the sound of Mrs. Laura's laughter, and the voice of her fiancé and that of another person. The presence of the last worried Baryka most of all. Dammit! Who could it be?

In the meantime the three persons had entered the hall and were conversing merrily. Mr. Barwicki bid his fiancée farewell, urging her to go to bed right away—so the next day she would not tire herself out as she had in previous days, and end up looking bad at the ball. The third person assured him that “Lola” would go to bed at once. Cezary guessed that this must be the mother of Laura's first husband, Mrs. Kościeniecka senior. He sat hunched on his sofa and experienced veritable torments of foolish unease. What if Barwicki came looking for something in that room...Or the old lady...And in fact, someone's steps approached the door of the library. Mrs. Laura came in. She gave a smile of delight when she saw her secret guest. She said aloud:

“They always leave the lights on here unnecessarily!”

She hurried over to the table and blew out the lamp. Barwicki also came up to the library door. There followed farewell whispers and counter-whispers. At last the fiancé left the entrance hall and went out onto the verandah. Soon there came the rattle of a departing carriage. Mrs. Laura returned to the hall and said to her mother-in-law:

The Coming Spring

“Oh, it’s time to go to sleep! I’m so very tired.”

“You’re going to bed right away?”

“Right away! I’ll just go and lock the porch door. Good night, mama!”

Cezary heard a kiss and the rustle of light footsteps. Mrs. Laura crossed the library and loudly locked the door through which he had made his way in. For a moment she listened to the steps of the elderly lady as she mounted the stairs. Then she came up to Baryka and in the darkness found his hand. She squeezed it in her own burning palm and pulled him after her. On the way she blew out the lamp that stood in the hallway and led her lover upstairs, virtually on the heels of her mother-in-law. Both stepped agilely, placing their feet at exactly the same time, so only one creak could be heard at each tread.

Upstairs Cezary was given a push by Laura and found himself in her bedroom. It was a large and lovely room, brightly lit by a powerful lamp that stood on the windowsill. A large, thick, soft rug covered most of the floor. The furniture was tasteful, and numerous paintings hung on the walls. In an alcove half concealed by a handsome curtain there could be seen a mahogany bed that was still made and covered with a bedspread.

“You don’t have a cough, Mr. Baryka?” she asked quietly.

“No, ma’am.”

“Then come in here.”

Cezary entered an adjoining room, where there was a bureau with writing implements, and in front of it a rocking chair. He sat down in the chair and was terrified to hear the lady talking with someone. His heart beat in all earnestness this time. But it slowed down when he

realized it was the maid turning down her mistress's bed. Soon the maid whispered briefly: "Good night," and closed the door behind her. Mrs. Laura turned the key in that door and then finally opened the door to her guest's hiding place.

Cezary reached out his arms for his trophy, the fruit of such great courage and fear.

But the trophy pushed his arms away, whispering:

"Sometimes Barwicki comes back..."

"What? What for?"

"Out of unassuaged longing for his 'angel.'"

"Would he dare to do so tonight?"

"Once he came back and stayed for two more hours."

"What a fool!"

"That's as maybe...We agreed that whenever he leaves, I'll always sit in the window as long as I can still see the lanterns of his landau across the fields. He asked me so to do it! He begged me! He needs it to help him sleep his pre-marital dreams in peace. To show that I remember him, that I'm thinking of him, that I'm dreaming of him while I'm still awake. So I turn the lamp up and down while he's driving away across the fields to the highway. Such are our love signals. And now—what have you done to me, Mr. Baryka?"

"Now let him drive away to hell!"

"I have to turn the lamp up and down; otherwise he could still come back."

"Then I'll adjust the wick for him. Let me do the job!"

"That's awful! What utter perfidy! Why should I not do it?"

The Coming Spring

“You’re hindered by your dress...Your dress!”

Standing in the broad bay window with its numerous panes, Cezary could indeed see two circles of light from the lanterns as they passed through the impenetrable abyss of the dark. He reduced the light expertly in the lamp on the window, then a minute later turned it up so high that soot burst from the glass tube. After a while he rotated the knob to draw the wick into the reservoir, making the light flicker swooningly like the convulsive ecstasy of love. Having reduced the flame almost to nothing, Cezary began once again increasing it to the maximum. He continued to do this until the two receding discs of light had disappeared completely...At that point two bare arms took hold of his curly head and turned it from the window. A laugh of joy rang out. Cezary staggered down from the raised window into the embrace of pure happiness.*

*

* The prudery of the author and his profound respect for the prudery of the reader, and above all obsequiousness toward the super-prudery of the critic, prevents the inclusion of details of this evening spent in Mrs. Laura’s locked room.

Nothing can be done! Respected reader—we do not live in the same age of great frankness as the master of the Renaissance and indeed of all ages Ludovico Ariosto, who in the Seventh Canto of *Orlando Furioso* did not begrudge himself and the world a description of the pleasure taken by Ruggiero and Alcina. In those times a writer was not obliged to remove the most essential part of his conception and toss it in the trash. Today we are unable to follow the lead of the great and universally revered fathers of creativity. And here, in this horizontal and worldly realization of the “coming spring” of life, we have to lock up the most essential, the healthiest, strongest image of the coming spring and its substance brimming with vitality, and leave the rest to the reader’s unhealthy, corrupt, and cynical “imagination.” (author’s note)

At last there came the great day of the charity ball. Country houses across the entire neighborhood fell into a state of turbulent activity. Hairdressers from Częstochowa and even from the local towns hurried in carriages from manor to manor waving, trimming, and combing the ladies' hair. On top of that, gowns were being ironed, altered, and finished right up till the last minute.

In Nawłóć it transpired that Maciejunio was not only a master of ceremonies but also a barber of no mean accomplishment. True, his notions and principles in this regard had the faintest whiff of the age of Bismarck's youth; nevertheless he was a dab hand at using a curling iron, testing its temperature on his own lip. His first client was naturally "young master Hipek"; then came "the guest"; and finally he gave Father Nastek "just a wee trim" as he put it, despite the feigned protests of the latter, so as not to let the others down. Hipek and Cezary were in their new tail coats, which were a perfect fit for their fine, stylish, soldierly figures. Father Nastek wore a glistening gown, over which there was something resembling a delicate, glossy miniature *żupan*²⁶ of costly saietta, with little silk buttons; it was unfastened at the front and tied at the neck with a silk cord and tassels. On his feet he wore patent-leather shoes with steel buckles; and on his calves—dammit!—quite simply ladies' stockings that rose all the way to the diabolically lofty mysteries of his mortal coil.

²⁶ A long robe traditionally worn by Polish noblemen.

The Coming Spring

When Cezary Baryka examined himself on all sides in the large mirror before he left, he was forced to admit that he looked “spiffing.” He gazed at himself as if he were looking at a stranger. He was utterly unlike the ragged, unkempt, barefoot ruffian who had transported bodies to the hills outside Baku, or the traveler lying under sheepskins on the journey from Kharkov to the Polish border. Not only did he like the way he looked, he also stirred in himself a powerful urge to strike a pose as an incomparable dandy and a broad-shouldered young fellow with a freshly trimmed noggin.

As the “three playboys” all gathered in Cezary’s room for a moment before heading out, Hipolit burst into uncontrollable laughter at the sight of Father Anastazy.

“What are you laughing at, Hipek?” asked the priest, not without a certain alarm in his voice.

“How could anyone not laugh! What on earth are you wearing, you daft sky pilot?”

“What do you mean? A robe.”

“Robe? That’s not a robe, it’s a dress; well, actually, a skirt, with a petticoat underneath. You should have embroidered some flounces on the front for decoration. If you can have those weedy tufts under your chin then you can have flounces down below.”

“There’s no need to be malicious!”

“What’s that you say? Either take off all those ecclesiastical furbelows and put on a tail coat, or go to the ball in a full-length cassock like any other priest.”

“Now then, Hipek, don’t you be so radical! You’re not exactly Voltaire, you know.”

“So it’s Voltaire already! Anyone dares to mock the frills and furbelows they’ll use to corrupt the hearts of the gentlefolk’s daughters, and already they’re a supporter of Voltaire.”

The argument was interrupted by the hollow rumble of the wheels of a carriage on the other side of the Arianka. The three of them flung on their overcoats, tossed scarves around their necks, and quickly took their seats. What words can describe the joy of healthy young people being taken by devilish strong horses to a ball of the Polish gentry! The cold night and its damp winds blew about heads that were lost in daydreams. A mighty feeling of excitement, a forceful eruption of invincible power, seemed to bear them more swiftly than the snorting horses toward the lights twinkling between bare trees in the far distance. From the lips of the young gentlemen there came carefree, cheerful, and not necessarily respectable songs.

“So Nastek, my brother, are you intending to dance today?” asked Hipolit.

“To dance? It’ll depend...”

“It’ll depend. But are you fellows allowed to dance? With women?”

“Listen, you’d be better off checking whether you’ve remembered to put a handkerchief in your pocket.”

The priest spoke these words in a preceptorial tone, as if he were uttering a moral principle.

Upon arrival in Odolany Baryka’s two companions were swept away by acquaintances from their circle; he himself entered the ballroom, and found himself in such a glittering and colorful whirl that he was discon-

The Coming Spring

certed and almost withdrew. He realized there were situations that lay above or beyond his entire education and the self-confidence he had acquired. Among such situations was that of behaving properly and naturally in a crowded drawing room. Cezary tried to blend into the throng of young people. But he knew no one here, so he was unable to engage in small talk with anyone. He pushed his way through, roamed around, "hung about" amid those in conversation, bumped into people, apologized, stepped on toes in patent-leather shoes...

It had long been established in the by-laws governing the picnic that those arriving would not be announced, nor in general would anyone be introduced to anyone else. It had further been agreed in the unwritten parts of those by-laws that the main and principal purpose of the event was to relieve every wealthy and well-to-do person of their money in the interests of the aforementioned "cripples," and to do so using all the known and unknown methods of fundraising. And so no one paid any attention to anyone else. People entertained themselves in groups according to society, neighborhood, one might say by village or parish. The band was already in full swing and a few couples were dancing in the empty expanse of the vast ballroom.

On his wonderings Cezary came upon an empty chair, and sat down in it casually so as to camouflage his social discomfort and inexperience. He kept worrying whether he was doing the right thing with his arms or whether he was arranging his Bolshevik feet in the appropriate way. He observed other representatives of the category of "young people" and held his limbs in accordance with what he saw.

At a certain moment a flame of living fire shot through his body from the top of his head to his big toes in their patent-leather shoes—Mrs. Kościeniecka had entered the room. She was wearing an exquisite ball gown whose pink satin, slightly transparent beneath its lace, lent her a new allure he had never seen before. In this gown she seemed slimmer and somehow taller. Her bare shoulders and back revealed the entrancing contours of her youthful frame and her lovely body. Cezary could not believe his eyes; he felt a burst of absolute joy as he saw that it was really her. He was overcome, now by a pride and vanity hidden from himself at her unparalleled beauty, now by a choking, exhausting bitterness. Beside her—tail-coated, stylish, in gleaming shoes and shirt-front, shaven cheeks and showing now one, now the other lobe of black pomaded hair—was her fiancé Barwicki.

Mrs. Laura was conversing, greeting people, and smiling. She took a seat. Her merry, sparkling eyes looked around the large drawing room, which was growing ever more congested. She returned bows and smiles, left, right and center. She responded to Cezary's bow with a cheerful bow of her own. But her eyes did not linger on him even for a moment, but passed on...He knew that that was how it ought to be, that that was how it must be, yet he was struck with the sharp and painful sting of resentment. He strove not to look in her direction, mostly so as not to see that "fool" Barwicki, who kept leaning towards his fiancée—"the fool!"—and kept whispering something—"the fool!"—in her ear.

In the meantime the entire company from Nawłóć had entered the room: Mrs. Wielosławska; Uncle Michał,

The Coming Spring

sporting his thick drooping mustache and particularly transformed by his tail coat; the two aunts, Angélique and Victoire ("Oh, those old coots!" as their villainous nephew Hipolit used to sing)—and finally Karusia and even Miss Wanda Okszyńska, who had been brought along out of pity, the poor thing, in a dress thrown together at the last minute. They had all thundered over in two immense carriages and were now showing the world what *Nawłóć* was and what it meant. And so they assumed dignified expressions and exquisite postures, with heads held high and smiles from thirty-five years before. With the exception, of course, of the foundling Karolina, and also Miss Wanda, who gazed into space with terrified eyes that saw nothing and nobody, and would have scarpered had the dashing Miss Szarłatowicz not been grasping her firmly by the hand. Both spotted Baryka in the crowd of men and both experienced the same feelings that he had experienced upon seeing Mrs. Kościeniecka.

But Cezary too was glad to see the young ladies. Struck by a sudden resolution, he stood from his seat the moment they sat down, came up to them with the gallant gestures drummed into him by his dancing masters in Baku, and asked Miss Karusia to join him in the shimmy. Since the center of the room was still rather empty, he drew attention to himself and his partner. From over her shoulder he was free to gaze at Laura Kościeniecka. In this dull, monotonous dance he could draw close to the other woman then move away from her again as from the source of his joy. Holding close to his own heart a heart that had never before experienced love, a heart that had beaten madly for him for the first

time, for the first time relishing the delights of that emotion—joining with Karolina in an almost physical convulsion, since he was separated from her only by her thin dress, while the rhythm and dictates of the dance rendered her to him bodily—all this time he was dying of longing for Laura. As he moved away from her he blazed with love, fear, resentment, hatred, and anger till he could not breathe, while Barwicki whispered in her ear. If only he could hear what was being said!

But other eyes saw him and the dance and experienced the same passion! They belonged to Wanda Ok-szyńska. For her, the room with its gleaming parquet floor was a bottomless chasm, a black abyss in which there spun this malicious spirit who was pressing Karolina Szarłatowicz to his bosom, joining his breast, thighs, and feet to hers. She knew perfectly well what lay beneath the external form of this dance, how this sort of dance ended and what they thought of and dreamed of as they went on dancing and smiling. She alone knew the secret, the enigma, of the monstrous meaning of the dance those two were engaged in. What she had seen with her own eyes had been such a stunning revelation of corporeal secrets—of a mystery that for her was mortal, the immodest coming together of bodies—that it had thrust her into a state of unremitting madness. Now the scene was repeated before her eyes. Now the same secret was revealed in front of her.

Miss Wanda sat timorously on her chair—just like during a church retreat—in the place where fate had abandoned her in the midst of the ball, or rather had swept her across a wilderness of despair. Dry sobs rent

The Coming Spring

her heart. The attachment that had taken complete control of her was torn apart by the wolves' fangs and tigers' claws of jealousy. Cries died on her lips and she was choked by a blind weeping. She kept smiling her artificial smile as an ever-denser darkness descended on her eyes in that room bursting with light. And in her utter prostration, a way out suddenly glimmered. Relief appeared in the hard rock of her heart. A voice, like a consoling, tempting counselor, beckoned to her in her darkness. It was hatred of Karolina.

"Just you wait!" Miss Wanda, the girl who did not know her multiplication tables, whispered to her rival.

At last, after dancing back and forth numerous times from one end of the ballroom to the other, Cezary escorted Miss Karolina to her seat. Then, no sooner had he mopped the beads of perspiration from his brow with a perfumed handkerchief bearing Hipolit Wielosławski's monogram, than he went up to the first of the young ladies "of the neighborhood." He gave her a goodly "spin" about the dance floor, then escorted her back to her seat. And then—o mercy!—he went up to Aunt Aniela.

The latter greeted his charity almost with an exclamation. Both aunts still danced. Both wore fashionable gowns on their frames covered with sagging flesh and loose agglomerations of fat. Their withered scrags and hideous breasts were covered by old-fashioned bodices and imitation necks made of an artificial substance that mimicked the protuberances and smoothnesses of a young body. With the aid of pieces of velvet concealing the join between the fake necks and the real ones, and

of a veritable abundance of powder covering the synthetic bosoms, in the artificial light of the evening ballroom the grotesque old aunts counted on pulling the wool over everyone's eyes. They themselves were dreaming one more time—and who could know if it wasn't the last?—and reliving their dream, of a paradise of love that was gone forever; or rather, to speak the truth—dammit!—they dreamed of the possibility of bodily union that was forever gone.

It was not at all out of pity, nor from a wish to indulge their illusory and vain megrims that Cezary pushed and pulled them hither and thither, "giving them a spin" and heating up first Aunt Aniela, then Aunt Wiktoria; and it was not out of politeness that he awakened an unhealthy ardor in each. It was his road to the object of his worship. He did not wish to throw himself at her. He was furious at her for conversing with everyone, and especially for her giggles and whispered words with "the other man." He circled around her, first with one spinning skirt and then with another. Besides, it was easiest to gaze at Laura during the dances, from behind or over the shoulder of one or another partner. After he had done the rounds of a whole series of young ladies, wives, widows, and divorcées, Wanda Okszyńska's turn came. When Cezary bowed before her, he heard a tiny squeak:

"Please, sir..."

"Yes, Miss Wanda?"

"Please, sir...I don't know how to dance!"

"Sure you do. I'll lead you in such a way that you'll learn how."

The Coming Spring

"I can't!" she sighed.

"Now then, it's as easy as the multiplication table! Surely you won't turn me down after we played the piano together!"

She stood up with a languid movement. When he took hold of her, she folded in his embrace like a mantle hung over his arm, and she had to be dragged across the floor like a sack of potatoes. She moved about the room in an ungainly manner, out of time to the music, held firmly in place by his arm.

Engrossed in his own amorous impulses, he was unaware of what was happening to her. He was unaware of the inextinguishable frenzy that he stirred in this girl as, in the presence of all the others, he held her to him, pressing her young, firm, budding yet already shapely breasts to his chest. But dragging Miss Wandzia around wearied him after his considerable prior exertions in the dance, and so he soon accompanied her back to her chair and sat her down. Then he turned as quickly as possible in the direction most important to him. It so happened that Mrs. Laura was free for a moment. He bowed before her. The second she rose, he heard her whisper in his ear like an exquisite cordial:

"Czarek! Czarus! Sweet Czarus! My Czarus the charmer! You're so handsome today. You're magnificent! Your hair looks wonderful. You're so attractive! You're more attractive than all the others. You're so strong, so powerful, so slim. You're so refined. And fragrant! You look splendid in that tail coat. I kiss your curly hair. I kiss your eyes. I kiss your mouth. I love

you, Czarus! I love all of your soft, firm, powerful, slim self! I love you to distraction! I love to you to death, my lovely Czarus!”

Mrs. Laura was quite beside herself. Amid the steps that stirred the blood in her veins, amid the glidings and bendings and reciprocations, the bodily requitals and moves of the dance, she uttered an untold multitude of compliments, words of endearment, verbal caresses and embraces of one or two syllables, which here—alas!—because of the restrictions of public decency, cannot be repeated.

Cezary was sullen and grimly obstinate. He muttered angrily:

“You keep talking with that fat fellow.”

“I have to...”

“He’s not human. He’s a complete bourgeois. A bull in a mustache. How can you look at that pomaded head of his? I can’t even stand him from a distance.”

“Czarus! Sweet Czarus! Charming Czarus! Don’t think about bulls. Don’t look at him. You’re the only one, just like there’s only one sun in the sky.”

“If it’s true you like me, then how the hell can you talk with that dolt?”

“I told you—you remember, Czarus, that time—I explained to you that I have to.”

“I don’t recall...”

“You’ve forgotten already? He’s rich—he has money from his brother, who died without an heir. He can pay off my *belle-mère*,²⁷ who’s hanging over Leniec like a ten-

²⁷ Mother-in-law (Fr.).

The Coming Spring

ton weight. I'd be independent. I'd be able to free myself. I have to."

"In that case I have to look at him with hatred."

"Don't think about that now, Czarus, sweet Czarus..."

"Thinking about you means thinking about him. And I think about you the whole time. Day and night! You're the only person on earth I can see! Only you, always and everywhere! I go mad without you! You, Laura! When?"

"Ah, when...I'll figure something out. Maybe today. Take me back to my seat now, then later you can dance with me again..."

"If that bourgeois leans over you one more time and whispers to you...What is it that he's whispering? How dare he? If you smile one more time when he whispers to you, I'll make such a scene that you'll all be out of here in the blink of an eye."

"Oh, you Bolshevik!"

Just as Mrs. Laura regained her seat Mr. Storzan was wheeled into the ballroom on a bath chair. In his tail coat, white tie and waistcoat, his hair neatly combed, and at his ease, the host of Odolany made a profound impression in his wheelchair, with his palsied legs covered by a light shawl. The entire company gathered round him. Continually inserting then removing a monocle from a dark eye socket, Mr. Storzan greeted them all with a refined, old-fashioned gesture and an amiable smile. He waved his arms, and it seemed as if he were kicking his motionless legs.

"I'm delighted," he said to the ladies surrounding him, "that at today's gathering I can at least serve as an emblem, a symbol."

"What do you mean? What emblem? What symbol?" people asked on all sides.

"I'm an emblem for all the 'amputees' that this function is intended to support. Please bring me a glass..."

Mr. Storzan took the glass proffered him almost on bended knee by one of his neighbors, clutched its slender stem with trembling fingers, raised it with difficulty in his bony hand and with a decorous smile which at that moment was replete with intense, as it were symbolic suffering, he said to those about him:

"I drink the health of the heroes of our land, who lost their arms or legs in defense of its freedom and of ours."

The toast was drunk in solemn silence, amid a general sense of awe, with tears in everyone's eyes. The entry of the host, and especially that somber toast of his, interrupted the dancing. Part of the company moved to the dining room, where exquisite hors-d'oeuvre had been prepared. At this time Mrs. Wielosławska walked majestically up to Miss Wanda Okszyńska, without a word took her by the hand and led her through the throng. Wanda Okszyńska was thoroughly convinced that this, in her view, almighty lady had seen in her aristocratic way right through her thoughts, feelings, shameful intentions and revolting desires, and was now leading her to the door of the mansion with the purpose of expelling her from human society, onto the dark courtyard crowded with old coach drivers and their whips. How-

ever, Mrs. Wielosławska took the ex-boarding school student somewhere much closer, to the keyboard of an expensive black pianoforte that stood on a low dais in the corner of the room. Here the “lady of the manor” sat Miss Wandzia on a round stool and whispered in her ear in a powerful, commanding tone that brooked no opposition:

“Play what you know best. Don’t embarrass me now! Mind you don’t make a fool of yourself. You understand? Just think about who’s listening to you. You’re to play superbly, as best you know how. Say a quiet prayer and play!”

“I understand, your ladyship, but I’m not sure I’ll be able...,” whispered Miss Wanda.

She placed her hands on the white keys of the magnificent pianoforte and struck them nervously once and then again. She heard the sounds of the superb instrument. Those individual sounds entered her and shot all the way through her like a light penetrating the darkness. She forgot she was being listened to by the “high and mighty”; she even forgot she was in such an extraordinarily vast room full of such outstanding ladies and gentlemen. She was instantly transformed into something quite different from what she had been a moment ago—into the divine agent of magical music. She no longer trembled from the great girlish fear that “persons” would be listening to music made by one whose worth she so very much doubted. Having heard the soul of her soul—music—she shook off her anxiety. The numbness of her hands left her. She felt that familiar, curious chill in her back and the tips of her toes, as if they were the

tools of the power she now fully controlled. She straightened up. She sat properly, like a queen in her majesty. Her hair seemed to be stirred and swept upwards by an immaterial fire. Her whole being unfolded from moment to moment, conscious of its strength, of the might of its soul that could see the whole of the masterpiece of music before her from first note to last. Her fingers became like the swift, compliant hammers covered in chamois that she was setting in motion inside the black box—like those demons running from nothingness to render their voice in accordance with her will and then disappearing into nothingness again. The pedal waited for her puny foot to raise up the song and reach the very bottom of the abyss with the bottomless utterances of the basses. The timid and indecisive young girl had become a bold spirit who dared to engage with the mighty forces of the emotions. Like a mysterious bird that burns on a pyre of myrrh and then rises again rejuvenated from its own ashes, a bright, multicolored phoenix, born from the pyre of all her feelings whose flight no one could have anticipated, began to fly about within her soul. She alone knew exactly where that part-colored creature flew, its red feathers glowing behind its head. She alone had followed it in the darkness and rendered its flight, its travels high and low, near and far. She played a song for the handsome young man she barely knew and with whom, as the expression goes, she had fallen mortally in love. Using the notes of the timeless genius she told the story of her love, all the agonies and sufferings, the hiding places and recesses of her feelings, their secret passages and pathways, their dark and awful

The Coming Spring

hollows and the joyful heavens that extended overhead whenever he came near. She played for her fellow lover Karolina a confession of hatred and a profound, a terrible warning...

As Miss Wanda began to play, pouring her passion into one of Beethoven's later sonatas, a hurry-scurry began in the rooms—some persons were entering and others leaving, some were sitting down and others crowding around the doors—and a most suitable opportunity presented itself. Mrs. Laura raised her eyebrows imperceptibly towards Cezary and, without looking any more in his direction, she slipped unnoticed out of the ballroom. He, instead of listening to the incantations of the music calling him and enticing him, sneaked out the room, admittedly in a different direction to Mrs. Laura, but headed for the same destination that had been indicated to him.

Yet there were in fact eyes that noticed the simultaneous departure of the two lovers, even though they left by different doors. Karolina Szarlatowicz, who had been living in a state of perpetual euphoria, certain as she could be that Cezary favored her, for he had kissed her so rapturously on so many occasions—Miss Karolina, then, had been following his every look like the keenest spy and the most resourceful detective, and she observed in astonishment once, twice, three times, ten times, a hundred, how his eyes turned to the beautiful widow. She began to watch the smiles and looks of the other woman. And she saw everything. Without hearing, she heard the words that the two of them whispered to one another during the dance. She comprehended the

twitch of Mrs. Laura's eyebrows. And she saw him leaving the room.

A blow from an executioner's ax upon her neck, or the thrust of a bandit's knife into her heart, could not have smitten her soul as much that discovery. She tumbled down from her Tarpeian Rock.²⁸ It was worse than when her home had been looted by the Bolsheviks. She was unable to rouse herself from the ghastly dream into which she had suddenly been plunged. She gazed at the people who a moment ago had been laughing merrily and enjoying themselves around her, and she could not understand where they had gotten to. Despair drove her from where she stood and led her through rooms and hallways onto a terrace. Karolina descended the wet slippery steps. As she was, in her light ball gown, she ran into the grounds. She went along some path, repeatedly stumbling against the trunks of great trees that soughed dully far above in the wind. Repulsed by one long line of trunks, she careened into another. Each rank of trees pushed her away.

"Oh Lord!" sighed Karolina as she staggered left and right among the trees. For a long time she walked through the night, dead inside and unaware of what was happening to her. At a certain moment she heard a quiet conversation. A whispering. With an unerring instinct, the infallible clairvoyance of the unhappy lover, she guessed that it must be him talking with Laura in this place. She listened intently. The conversation stopped; the wind

²⁸ A cliff on the Capitoline Hill in Rome from which traitors and criminals were thrown.

The Coming Spring

howled. They had probably spotted her white gown... Suddenly, something ominous and terrifying swept right by her. The enigma of her misfortune, condensed and solidified into a nocturnal specter, passed close by. It brushed against her gown. Karolina stared into the gloom and saw, truly with the eyes of the owl, and heard with the ears of the cat, and smelled with her own nostrils the scent of Laura's perfume. It had been the two of them passing her. Both of them. Dark, fragrant, silent. An accursed vision! They moved like a single specter made of two people, and disappeared into a blackness impenetrable to the power of sight, and inaccessible to the human ear. Her sense of smell could no longer detect their presence. Karolina was left alone. She put her arms round the cold trunk of a tree that she encountered on the way, and for a long time she poured out accursed tears of rejection. The wind thundered over her head.

When Karolina Szarlatowicz, frozen to the marrow of her bones, returned from the grounds to the lighted rooms, Wanda Okszyńska's music was over. She had been applauded away from the piano to prevent her from Beethovening any more. The band had struck up and people were dancing. The whole great ballroom was now filled with pairs moving back and forth to the rhythm of the shimmy. Later they danced "barbarian" dances: the mazurka, the oberek,²⁹ the krakowiak. One young gentleman demonstrated marvels in the stormy oberek, but found no imitators. By now both younger

²⁹ A lively Polish folk dance in 3/4 time.

and older dancers had had a fair amount to drink. The hum of conversation intensified and there was laughter everywhere.

Karolina was still freezing. She was shivering from the cold and her innards shook. It did not occur to her to have something to drink. She sat on a chair and stared at the crowd wearing a smile that seemed to have been fixed on her face. Suddenly she heard her own name. Father Anastazy was saying keenly:

"Karusia, my sweet! you have to dance for us, love! My dearest Ukrainian girl! You have to! In memory of that golden Ukraine...You have no idea," he explained to those standing nearby, "what a wonder it is when she dances. Karolina! You must!"

"Miss Karolina! Karolina! Miss Karusia!" everyone cried. Even Aunt Wielosławska came up and indicated with her eyes that it behooved her to dance since everyone was asking it.

There could not have been a worse moment for it. Karolina winced at the very thought of having to dance that rumbustious Cossack dance solo, right now...She was about to refuse point blank, when all at once she noticed Cezary in the crowd. He too was asking her to dance. Her heart trembled with lordly, powerful, Ukrainian, eastern pride. She looked in his direction and said through gritted teeth:

"I'd be delighted to if you all wish it. But am I to dance alone? Mr. Baryka is here; he dances the Cossack dance wonderfully. Perhaps he'd agree to dance with me..."

"Baryka!" roared Hipolit, who was already thoroughly tipsy. "Baryka dances a marvelous Cossack. Czaruś my

The Coming Spring

friend, get up! Just look—the loveliest Cossack girl of the Wild Fields,³⁰ exiled from her homeland, is asking you to remind her what's it's like back there...”

Cezary stepped out of the crowd and stood in the empty circle. Karolina assumed a pose and blossomed before him. Hipolit rushed over to the piano and began rhythmically hammering out the furious bars of the Cossack dance. Baryka started the dance. Placing his hands on his hips, he gradually skipped closer to Karolina, sometimes head on, sometimes sideways, or describing an arc. When he stood before her he stamped his feet most deftly. Then, repeating his previous movements and his skips, he quickly retreated back to his place. Now Karolina also put her hands on her hips and, tossing her head back, copied his steps. Her slim feet in their patent-leather pumps and silk stockings flashed like they were made of light as she moved forward across the space toward her partner. Then all at once they danced together, executing ever more sprightly, impetuous, and extravagant movements with their legs, squatting and jumping up again.

Karolina's dance comprised a paragon of grace and charm. It was like the image of a sudden treacherous attack whose victim equally treacherously and suddenly runs away. Her mouth bore a painful smile, her eyes shone like stars, and her white teeth glinted between her virginal lips, while her entire body tossed and writhed in

³⁰ The Polish name for what is today the Zaporizhzhia region of Ukraine, then a remote part of Poland. From the 16th to the 18th century it was an independent Cossack territory.

the throes of an invincible passion, caught in the clutches of a wild, untamed melody. In the way she held her hands on her hips, squatted, and kicked her legs faster than the eye could see, the melody of her young body was extraordinarily alluring and enticing. The dancer herself experienced a strange pleasure in imposing herself upon the gaze of the other dancer with his magnificent chest, his firm, flat stomach and his slender legs. Brazen, haughty, and provocative, she flashed her delicate feet before his eyes, thrusting out her breasts then concealing them again. Her head was proudly held high and tipped slightly back. Her eyes cast a thousand temptations and a thousand curses into the eyes of the wrongdoer and traitor.

Leaning against the body of the pianoforte and staring at the two dancers was Wanda Okszyńska. Her narrowed eyes measured every step that Cezary and Karolina took and counted their every smile.

At the far side of the circle in which the dance was taking place sat Laura Kościeniecka, leaning gracefully on a gold-colored armchair where all could see her in her beauty and her loveliness. She too was measuring every step, every skip, every movement, every bend and squat and rise of "her" Czarus, her sweet Czarus, her Czarus the charmer...In her ears she still heard the roar of the wind amid the bare hornbeams in the avenue. Her arms still retained the piercing autumn chill and the numbness in her back from the freezing, rough boards of the mossy bench in the dark depths of the arbor. On her lips she still had the scent of his lips, and on her breasts she still felt the joyful and blessed weight she so

The Coming Spring

longed for; and inside, in the secret places of her body—the hot, flaming fruit of his forceful pleasure bringing her a quiet, tender joy. Now he was delighting her with his dance, his speed, his inexhaustible, pulsating, restless strength. And in her whole being she felt him as a movement and a leaping that sailed back and forth over her will like the multicolored zigzag of a lightning bolt.

It was just at this moment that her fiancé, Mr. Barwicki, leaned toward her and whispered in her ear a sour remark about the impropriety of dancing a “Russki” dance at a Polish party. His comments were entirely valid, extremely well expressed, and pointedly formulated in caustic aphorisms. His fiancée fully acknowledged his biting observations. She shared his indignation. She was even prepared to protest, since as the instigator and hostess of this picnic...But it would not have been right. It would not have been right for her to do so. She pointed out to her fiancé that it was the Wielosławskis themselves—the mother, Anastazy, and Hipolit—who had requested a dance from this stray visitor, this Baryka, whoever he was. Where had they dug him up, this young pup? And what a name! Don’t you agree, my sugarplum?

In the meantime the “young pup,” nimble and strong as he was, nevertheless had to put an end to his Cossack squattings and liberate Miss Szarłatowicz from the same. As soon as the Cossack dance finished, the band once again began playing Negro dances and the whole room filled with glissading figures. Now the party had reached its apogee. From the dining room (or rather, the imbib-

ing room) there came a less than aristocratic cacophony of voices. Someone in there was already singing in a high baritone reminiscent of the song of tram wheels at a bend on a frosty morning. There could even be heard the shouts of altercations between drunken individuals. Hipolit and Father Anastazy appeared in the door of the ballroom and began beckoning Cezary. He moved toward them, shouldering his way through the crush of dancers.

"Why aren't you drinking anything?" asked Hipolit, staring agoggle through unfocused eyes and clutching with helpless hands at male and female neighbors alike.

"I am drinking."

"You're not drinking anything and you're not eating anything. You keep dancing the whole time. We're drinking and you're not drinking. You're dancing all these Cossack dances. What's all that about?"

"Wait a minute, it was me who asked him to...And you did too!" pointed out the ecclesiastic.

"The hell with that! The hell with you, you sky pilot! I know what I'm saying. He despises us. I know it, and there's nothing more to be said! He refuses to drink with us because we're bourgeois and he's a big Bolshevik. Keep out of my way, you oaf! You black Jesuit, you Holy Joe! I know what I'm saying. Czarus, my brother! You remember?"

"I remember, Hip! No fear..."

"Between Łysów and Patków, in the Rogacz woods. There's a little meadow and a road, and over there a manor house. I'm lying in the ditch and I can't see the meadow or the woods or the manor, because some Russian oaf just

The Coming Spring

stuck a bayonet in my belly. Then all of a sudden I feel someone picking me up. They give me a piggyback and we cross the meadow at the double, then down the valley and over the bridge to Patków! My brother! Drink with me, brother! My brother Czarus Baryka!”

“All right, we’ll have a drink!”

“You, sky pilot, you black Jesuit—buzz off! You’re still here? Get lost, you miserable priest! Let’s drink! You were holed up somewhere safe and sound, and even so your teeth were chattering with fear—snap snap snap... I know you! Now you’re all polished up... Things aren’t that easy, my friend!”

“This is what comes of attending a Russian grammar school,” Father Anastazy murmured to those sitting nearby.

“There you go again with your Khyrov³¹ and all! It’s more than I can take!”

“Be quiet, Hip! How can you go on at your brother like that...”

“What sort of brother is he! He’s a damned priest. In Khyrov he used to make his confession in Latin. He can get lost; I’m drinking with you!”

“And I’m drinking with you!” exclaimed Cezary, matching the deed to the word.

“What kind of drinking is that! You despise me, because I’m supposedly an aristo, a bourgeois, while you’re a red Bolshevik. Oh, you’re way off, Czarus...way off! Cut open my heart, cut it open, and you’ll see...”

³¹ A town in the Ukraine where there was a Jesuit college with a school for boys.

"Czaruś, drink with me too!" insisted Father Anastazy. "Pay no attention to what this free-thinker is saying about me. It's the consequence of his Muscovite education. It's his Muscovite education, and that's all there is to it!"

"I'll drink with you, father."

"Get lost, you black priest! You see the cassock he put on, Czaruś...Satin on the outside, and underneath it his sky pilot's back. *A bas la calotte!*"³² Hipolit began to shout in such a hoarse voice that everyone in the large room turned to look at him with a laugh.

But at this stage Hipolit himself could see very little. He was waving his arms and moving his legs ineffectively, unable to place his footsteps. He perched on a table, his head drooping. His friends, neighbors, and acquaintances propped him up and, supporting his whole weight, dragged him off into the smoky distance.

Father Anastazy remained behind, and felt an obligation to deputize for Hipolit. He and Baryka drank together, exchanging embraces and debating with one another uninterruptedly. Their dispute was theological in nature and was larded with so many subtleties that in the end it was utterly unclear what the cleric was trying to prove and what Cezary was arguing against. Their voices grew louder and louder; they caviled every word; they kept taking offense and then apologizing as they returned to the substance of the conflict, the heart of the matter, the very essence of the controversy. But soon

³² "Down with the clergy!" A slogan from the French Revolution.

The Coming Spring

there came the fatal moment when neither of them could remember exactly what the controversy had been. They were rescued from this perplexity by a certain song they were both fond of, and so they both began singing. But the singing also went rather badly. Soon each of them was rendering a different tune.

This was how things stood when Cezary was summoned by envoys to the ballroom. He went off resolutely. Mrs. Kościeniecka wished to see him. He came up to her with the intention of dancing, but seeing Mr. Barwicki at her side he straightened up and began muttering various Polish and foreign expressions of varied provenance, but mostly from the Russian of Baku, from Turkish, Persian, Georgian, and in general from the port. Fortunately he was given some assistance in changing direction. Supported by helpful hands, he set off after Hipolit Wielosławski.

It was morning already when he woke up in some room. Hipolit was snoring so thunderously that the curtains were twitching. Father Anastazy was washing in a large blue-enameled bowl. He was snorting like a young colt, pouring water over his head and then snorting again. Finally he dried himself off and in a sober voice asked:

“Czaruś, are you coming with me?”

“Where to?”

“Nawłóć.”

“Then where are we, father?”

“In Odolany, at the picnic. At the picnic in Odolany,” sang the cleric in a fine and clear voice.

“Then yes I am!”

"In that case—up you get! Come on now! Look sharp! Hipek'll stay here. That drunken sot with his Muscovite education. Later we'll send a covered carriage for him, to keep him from being seen and scandalizing anyone. Up you get!"

Cezary was thoroughly befuddled, but already sobering up. He washed, combed his hair, and dressed in a trice. He threw his overcoat over his arm and plonked his hat on his head. Tiptoeing out, they walked down a hallway and across the entrance hall. At the other end of the mansion music was playing and there could be heard the hum of the party, which still seemed to be rocking that immense, quiet house. When they opened the front door, the horses were waiting outside. Jędrek sat on the box wearing a cheerful expression.

"I see you got plastered last night, you smart alec!" cried the priest sternly. "I can tell from your expression."

"Nevertheless, I can drive. I guarantee a safe return."

"You so much as try anything unsafe with us, you boozier, and I'll show you!"

The priest hopped into the cabriolet, followed by Cezary. The horses set off. Day was breaking. As the carriage passed the grounds, Cezary gazed intently, searching in the daylight for the places he had visited during the night.

Beyond the grounds and the avenue there appeared the village of Odolany. The light of oil lanterns shone in the windows of the cottages. The doors of the tiny, low, thatched houses were creaking. Horses whinnied. Cows lowed, pigs squealed, and geese gaggled. Roosters

The Coming Spring

crowed and dogs yapped furiously. People were seeing to the livestock, bustling about the mean troughs and bringing water and feed. There was a throb of hard, rough, workaday tasks in every group of houses. At times someone running along would pause for a moment, trailing heavy boots through the depths of the mire. They would gaze at the passing carriage, at its team-horses breathing billows of condensation—and run off to their labor. The deep mud of the highway seemed to overflow into the courtyards and join up with the dunghills. Seeing the wretchedness of that human life amid the mire and the dunghills, Cezary was struck by an unendurable sorrow.

“Houses of glass,” he murmured.

“What was that?” asked Father Anastazy.

“Nice village,” said Cezary.

“Oh, it’s just a village. Neither nice nor otherwise. It’s just Odolany. Work is needed here, so much work! The folk hereabouts are good, honest, godfearing, thrifty, hard-working people, but all kinds of work is needed on them.”

Cezary gave a quiet laugh.

“What are you laughing at? I know what I’m talking about—I live among them. They’re all the same.”

“I wasn’t laughing, Father Anastazy, just yawning. Just yawning!”

*

After the delights of the picnic there followed vapid, tedious days. The greater the agitation and the deeper

the welter wrought by the party, the stronger there could subsequently be felt the placidity of the countryside and the severity of everyday chores. Cezary Baryka had stopped mentioning the position at Chłodek. He would mumble something about returning to Warsaw to resume his medical studies, but it was only for appearances and only to elicit a firmer invitation to stay longer. It would have been hard for him to leave at this time. He had suddenly taken root here and was embedded up to his waist, his shoulders even. He had a thousand pieces of business to see to, and every one of them was aimed at dreaming up pretexts. He fidgeted and writhed when he was unable to slip away to Leniec. He would wait, pace about, or go walking in the fields, always in the place where clumps of brown trees could be seen on a distant, mist-swathed hilltop. On the pretense of observing the ploughing, or of hunting, or most often of taking a solitary ramble, he was constantly drawn in that direction. But the days passed, empty, deathly monotonous, unbearably barren. Nothing! No word, no news, no sign! It sometimes seemed to him that everything he had experienced had been no more than a sensual dream. He barely saw the people around him. And he was so engrossed in his secret passion that he was absolutely convinced he was concealing the secret from everyone else. He was entirely certain that no one knew a thing about his feelings. In fact, his every step, his every intention, every time he turned pale at the mention of Leniec or the name Laura, every private sigh and every reverie—all was plainly visible to watchful eyes.

The Coming Spring

One afternoon, when it was already dark and gloomy, in the old drawing room at Nawłóć he was playing the piano with Miss Wanda Okszyńska. He was playing automatically, lost in his inner woes, hammering the keys with lifeless blows, and tearing at the changeless thread of his longing with complex, nervous movements of his fingers. It could be said that he did not hear the music his own hands produced, but that only from time to time did certain mysterious forces rise toward him from the mutable melody and clutch at his innards. The piece by Liszt that they had been playing together came to an end. The hands of both players remained on the keyboard. With the fingers of his left hand Cezary continued to pick out the final melody. All at once he felt with profound astonishment that Miss Wanda had placed her right hand not on the black or white keys but on his hand. Her elongated hand, cold as ice and trembling convulsively, was pressing his own hand onto the keys, and her thin fingers were clutching his fingers in a firm grip. Cezary sat for some time without moving, yielding to this clasp, utterly at a loss about what he was to do with this person holding his hand. He raised his eyes to the young maiden. Her head was turned away and lowered between her shoulders, as if to hold back tears or to protect herself from blows. The hand that enfolded his hand was still quivering feverishly, and the talons of her fingers dug into his own. At first he thought his partner had come over unwell, that it was some kind of young lady's fit—the *isterika* that young women in Russia so often suffered from. But when he noticed the smile on her face he understood. He withdrew his hand care-

fully and firmly from under hers. He did not know what to do next. He recalled a well-known song from the op-eretta:

*In Ida's woods three goddesses
Argue and argue heatedly,
Each one known for loveliness:
Which is the fairest of us three?*³³

His thoughts flew to the one he adored, his goddess. His reverie led him toward her. He said with a cruel, merciless smile:

"I once saw you running from a guinea fowl."

"Me? You saw that, sir?" she groaned, giving a start.

"I saw all your ribbons and bows and laces fluttering around you, and you were shouting loudly and making your getaway."

Miss Wanda spun about on the spot. A low moan, then a sharp squeal came from her lips. She stood up. She sat down. She stood up again. She curtsied. She sidled out of the room and across the verandah into the garden as if she were being pursued by a thousand enraged guinea fowl, peacocks, roosters, and turkey cocks.

Cezary's constant ponderings over how to see his cherished one came to fruition: he succeeded sometimes in catching sight of her. This statement may seem erroneous, but everything seemed to justify it: the longing, the nervous anticipation, the being beside himself, the

³³ From Jacques Offenbach's opéra-bouffe *La Belle Hélène* (1864); the reference is to the judgment of Paris.

The Coming Spring

urge to see her, the summoning of her with all the powers of his soul and every drop of blood in his body, the dreaming of her so insistently that her figure almost materialized before his eyes—all this eventually produced her in the flesh. She would suddenly emerge from his dreams, in reality, as if she had answered the call of his inner frenzy. Cezary had thought on several occasions that at this very second she should, she must, appear; and, whenever he turned his head, she was always there, bringing the gift of her joyous smile, the response of her soul to the dreams of his. So it was once in the church in Nawłóć village, during a turgid sermon by Father Anastazy. And another time in the drawing room at Nawłóć, when she came in unannounced at a moment when his longing was at its most ardent.

How he loved her smile, her gestures, her speech, her gaze! How he adored her sense of humor, good-natured and amicable—a mild humor, straightforward and composed—homely yet subtle humor in which there was nothing vulgar, egregious, or ambiguous, not in the slightest! How he adored the quiet confidentiality of conversations with her about uncommon, extraordinary things, when she spoke from heart to heart about her own soul and the soul of her friend! Those conversations were like strolls in the sunshine in a distant land—a fairy tale about the two of them meant for them only. In her there was no licentiousness; everything was out of love. Even those aspects of love that are unbridled licentiousness, in her were only love. Her frenzy, her ecstasy, her transport and all her amorous madness were complete, but they were also a burnt offering to the

godhead who bore the name "Czaruś." Since she was two years older than the godhead, and furthermore a widow, she regarded herself in some way as the guardian of this youngster. She gave him various pieces of good advice and good-hearted counsel. She taught him much wisdom that he had not yet managed to acquire in his chaotic and scattered life.

Other than Karolina, who had seen some signs, heard others, sensed some and figured out more, and in some cases simply sniffed them out—aside from her, no one in Nawłóć suspected a thing. Dear Mrs. Kościeniecka, their darling neighbor, had come to visit and to chat about the picnic; she brought all manner of gossip, stories, and anecdotes, and one couldn't get enough of them. The laughter went on all evening, and they wouldn't let her go. How could her visit have been strange or improper? What was strange in the fact that she spent a long time recalling various things with the gentlemen, her dancers, Hipolit and Cezary—that she told them what mischief they had gotten up to once they were well in their cups? Only Karolina caught a certain nod, after which Cezary was given a tiny card.

And then the next day Cezary asked for horses to go to Częstochowa. He needed to send an urgent telegram to his friend and, in effect, his guardian, Mr. Gajowiec, to let him know that he would not be returning just yet, even though Mr. Gajowiec had asked him in a registered letter to come by a certain date. Karolina made spy-like inquiries and found out that on the same day Mrs. Kościeniecka had also left Leniec. When she inquired further about her destination, it transpired that she too

The Coming Spring

had gone to Częstochowa. What was probable became in Karolina's mind a certainty.

No one else heard in the dark, windy, stormy night, but Karolina did—yes, she heard it!—hoofbeats, and even the neighing of a horse in the grounds. Why would a horse be neighing in the grounds? Who could be riding a horse on the paths in the middle of the night? Karolina walked those paths in the morning and found the tracks of horseshoes. They were half washed away by the torrential autumn rain and the thundering gale. Someone had come in the night. An accursed guest had been here. One unafraid of the dark and wind, the rain and the dense fog. Unafraid of being seized and found out, of being met with shots like a nighttime thief. Karolina's eyes followed the direction of the tracks and found the tree to which the horse had been tethered. Here was where the withered plants had been trampled, and here the bark had been rubbed off. The horse was freezing cold in the gale and that was when it had neighed. It must have waited a long time in the wind and rain, since it had trodden such a clear circle around the tree. The thief must have dallied long, oh so long, in the park.

Cezary frequently disappeared all of a sudden in the early evening. He would say that he had letters to write or that he had a headache. But the next day the scullery boy had a terrible job cleaning his wet and muddy shoes, while his clothes needed to be dried in front of the fire. When Karolina got up in the morning she picked up those clothes when the servants were not looking and sniffed them—and when she smelled the scent of Laura's perfume, she descended into an abyss of mad-

ness. Besides, the manner in which that young pup had turned away ruthlessly and brutally from everything and everyone—and especially from her—confirmed the dire truth more than all her spying.

*

On one of the last days in November, after a whole day's absence in the town of Śnieguły, where he had been with Hipolit, Cezary returned to Nawłóć to find a card from Father Anastazy left on the table in his room. It was written in pencil, in capital letters, and read as follows: "Come to Karolina's room immediately! Anastazy." Before Cezary could figure out what this meant, and before he had even had time to wash his hands after the journey, the door opened and Father Anastazy did not enter the room so much as burst in, wearing his surplice and stole.

"Come right now!" exclaimed the priest.

"What's the meaning of all this?" snorted Cezary.

"To Karolina's room! Do you hear me?"

The priest's tone was peremptory. And he was sobbing. He seized Cezary's arm in an imperious fashion and tugged it violently. Cezary tore his arm away and grew angry.

"Let me alone! I'm not one of your parishioners."

"Come this second! Hurry up! Karolina's dying!"

"What did you say?"

"She's dying! That lovely child! She's asked to see you one last time. She keeps begging for that alone. Get a move on, or we may be too late!"

Father Anastazy wept loudly and helplessly. Cezary was so stupefied that he ran out of the room without his cap, following the priest and not thinking what he was doing. As the two of them raced one another through the door and rushed across the grounds, Cezary breathlessly asked more questions:

“What’s happened? How? What is it?”

“Ask yourself!”

“What are you on about!”

“Ask yourself! I heard her final confession. You get my drift? I’m saying nothing. But you—you should beat your breast!”

“Be quiet there, father!”

“Lord have mercy!”

Hipolit was standing on the verandah, wringing his hands and beating his head against a pillar. At that very moment a pair of team-horses galloped up to the verandah, so covered in foam that the coats of the magnificent creatures could not be seen. Jędrek was unable to stop the horses in their rush, despite straining every muscle in his body. The britzka finally came to rest all the way over among the trees of the grounds. The young doctor from the town jumped out. Without greeting anyone, in his hat and overcoat and carrying his bag of instruments under his arm he followed Hipolit at a run through the door and across a series of rooms. The priest and Cezary came behind. From three rooms away there could be heard desperate groans—a veritable howling from Karolina as she writhed in agony. A crowd stood in the doorway of her room: aunts, Mrs. Wielosławska, maids, Maciejunio the butler,

Wojcunio, farm girls, the steward's wife, the stable hands' women. They were all jabbering, running about, bringing things and taking them away, deliberating and crying. Soberest of all was Maciejunio, who was constantly carrying something in or out and calming everyone down.

Cezary pulled at his sleeve and asked in a whisper:

"What happened?"

"The young lady fell ill."

"What's the problem?"

"She's in dreadful pain."

"Is it her stomach?"

"No. It's something serious."

He leaned over to Baryka's ear and whispered emphatically:

"It looks to me like poisoning."

"You think she took poison herself?"

"That I don't know. She came in screaming from the garden. And she's been thrashing about like this for an hour or more."

"Poisoning couldn't have lasted an hour."

"I don't know."

As if on cue, the doctor emerged from the room. He looked impatiently around at those gathered and muttered reluctantly:

"It's too late. Which of you is Mr. Baryka?"

"What is it?" inquired Cezary.

"Please come in. She's asking for you."

Cezary entered the little room for the very first time. He was struck by the ghastly appearance of Karolina's face. It was utterly gray; it looked as if it were made of

The Coming Spring

oilcloth, with black rings under the eyes. Her whole body was shaking unceasingly. She moaned:

“Mr. Cezary...Goodbye.”

“What have you done, Miss Karolina?” he exclaimed emotionally.

“I don’t know what it is. Something’s happening...to me...Be well, Czarus...”

There was no one else in the room. All at once Father Anastazy came in. Crying, with a gesture that brooked no opposition he thrust Cezary’s right hand into Karolina’s trembling hand, wrapped both hands in his stole and, muttering a Latin prayer, he set about making signs of the cross over the two bound hands.

Karolina’s face eased. A white light passed across it. A smile broke through what was evidently inhuman pain, and lingered for a moment on blackened lips that looked like iron. Cezary leaned over and placed a kiss on that mouth, which he had been the first to touch with his own lips, and would be the last. He recoiled, because her lips opened inertly and, with a horrible groan, her whole tongue emerged between them and lolled out. The groan repeated once and twice, and then with a curious suddenness everything subsided. The doctor placed his ear to Karolina’s chest. He listened for a long time. He brushed off his fingers, stood up and began tidying his implements and looking for where he had dropped his hat and coat. Karolina was dead. The doctor said:

“Please be so kind as to inform the regional medical officer. This is a clear case of poisoning.”

His declaration was greeted first with silence, then with a general moan, heartfelt weeping, shouts, and a clamor

of voices. Everything was in turmoil and uproar. Father Anastazy, besieged by all and weeping bitterly, said:

“I can’t tell you anything, my children, though I know everything. You yourselves know that I can’t pass on anything that I heard at confession. I’ll just say one thing: Pray fervently for her, because she’s not a suicide. She’s a victim.”

The common people dropped to their knees at the door to Karolina’s room. The priest prostrated himself right by the bed and prayed aloud amid the sobbing. Cezary stood in the corner of the room. He was staring at Karolina’s dark, almost black face. He remembered that he had seen just such a face before, a long time ago, when he was transporting corpses in Baku. One of them had called out to him in just the same way, though her words had no longer been audible. Scarcely had everyone finished the murmured prayer than the whole house was filled with whispering and chattering. It spread from the house to the courtyard, into the barns and the farmhands’ quarters, and to the outlying buildings of the manor and the village.

“What happened? How? Why? Who’s to blame?”

They began gathering information to establish the story of that day. But it was difficult, because ordinarily Karolina was everywhere, constantly bustling about, hurrying to and fro. How then could they determine the exact details? Maciejunio claimed that he had been the first to hear her shout when she called for help on the verandah. It was consequently assumed that she had come from the garden. But no one had seen her in the garden or the grounds, for they were deserted at that

The Coming Spring

hour. They began to investigate step by step, minute by minute where Karolina had been that day: in the cattle sheds, in the steward's house, in the farmhands' quarters, in the manager's home, in the hen house, at the pigsties. They started to establish the exact chronology of her movements and established that after lunch, in other words at the latest point, she had been in the apartment of the manager of the estate, Mr. Turzycki. And so everyone, even Mrs. Wielosławska, both aunts, Uncle Michał, Hipolit, Cezary, and Maciejunio—all ran to the Arianka. Mrs. Turzycka, who was forever busy, if not in the kitchen then in its vicinity, knew nothing of what had happened "at the manor." When she was told that Karolina was dead she was dumbfounded. She sat down on a chair and stared wide-eyed at this collection of high-ranking personages. She kept mumbling something incomprehensible. In the end she burst out:

"But Miss Karusia was here late in the afternoon! The picture of health! The kindest, nicest person! What are you saying!"

"At what time was Karolina here?" asked Uncle Michał.

"What time? Let me think...We didn't look at the clock. We were talking, chatting away...She came in, shut the door, because there's always a draft from that door; we sat down in this meager little sitting room of ours, and then...What time was it when Miss Szarłatowicz was here, Wandzia? Where are you? Wandzia!"

From the next room came the timid voice of Miss Wanda Okszyńska. First an unremarkable cough, then her voice:

"It was four o'clock. After four."

"Four o'clock," repeated Mrs. Turzycka precisely. "After four."

"Did Karolina eat anything here, or perhaps drink something?" asked Michał Skalnicky in an innocent manner, as if for something to say, gathering all possible versions of the last day as one might.

"She did have something to drink. She liked water with blackcurrant juice. When she visited she always drank either water with blackcurrant juice or tea with cranberry juice. I'd made some blackcurrant juice for the winter. That was the juice Miss Karolina drank. When she came, I asked her nicely: 'Have some tea with cranberry juice, Miss Karolina.' And Miss Karolina replied..."

"Did she drink the whole glass?"

"Yes, she did. I believe she drank the whole glass. Or maybe there was some left. That I don't remember, sir. We were talking. Is it possible..."

"Mrs. Turzycka...Could the glass that poor Karusia drank her juice from still be around somewhere? We need to see what kind of juice it was that harmed her so!"

"The blackcurrant juice, harm her?..." said Mrs. Turzycka, horrified. "My juice!" Her face turned white as a sheet and her entire substantial body trembled. "That juice could have harmed Miss Karolina? The juice I made with my own hands? No, sir! You can say what you like about me, but the juice that I made couldn't have harmed Miss Karolina! That's absolutely out of the question!" she declared in a tone of dignity and injured pride.

The Coming Spring

“Did you give her the glass of water and juice yourself?”

“Did I give her it myself? Just a moment! I ran to the kitchen when Miss Karusia declared that she’d like a drink of water—I took a glass of water from the tin pail. The water’s from our well—it’s the purest in the world. Then I went into the pantry and brought out a bottle of juice. I put the bottle on a tray. Next to the bottle was the glass of water. I called my niece, that Wandzia, the poor creature you were kind enough to take to the party at Odolany, and I asked her to take the tray into the sitting room and give it to Miss Karusia because I had to go and lock the pantry. Sometimes the pantry can be left open for just a couple of minutes and already one thing or another’ll go missing. Who took it, who moved it—you could search high and low and you’d never find out!”

“So it was Miss Wandzia who carried the juice and water from the kitchen to the sitting room?” Uncle Michał asked politely.

“Yes, it was Wandzia.”

“And where is Miss Wandzia, your niece, ma’am?”

“Wandzia—come in here,” called Mrs. Turzycka.

Miss Wanda entered from the neighboring room and curtseyed to those gathered. She knew everyone by now; she had often been at the manor house, and had known a great deal of kindness and goodwill from these people, so she was not afraid of anyone. Besides, during this stay of hers in the country she had grown accustomed to company, and had acquired a certain polish in her relations with others. The kerosene lamp cast an indistinct light on Miss

Okszyńska's face. She stood calmly by the door, fiddling in her schoolgirl's way with the hem of her apron.

"It was you, Miss Wanda, who gave our cousin Miss Karolina Szarłatowicz the water in the glass?" asked Mr. Skalnicky, speaking as it were in the name of all those assembled. He spoke in a good-natured, fatherly way, and most courteously.

"Yes, I gave her it."

"Did you give her the juice in the bottle and the glass of water separately, or was it you who poured the juice into the glass?"

Miss Wanda did not answer right away. It seemed that she was gathering her thoughts and recalling those minor events. In the end she replied:

"Miss Karolina herself poured the juice from the bottle into the glass."

"So you did nothing except take the tray from the kitchen into the little sitting room, and set it down on the table here?"

"I also...I also took the sugar in the silver sugar bowl from the cupboard in the other room and put it on the tray."

"Because sometimes," Mrs. Turzycka broke in hurriedly, "Miss Karusia would add sugar. Though the juice was sweet. Sweet as you like! But of course it had a little bitterness, and so she liked to sweeten it. Wandzia, the thoughtful child, took the sugar from the cupboard, knowing as she did of Miss Karolina's preference; and she put it on the tray and brought it in."

"And Miss Wanda, did you sweeten the drink for our cousin, or did she do it herself?" asked Hipolit.

The Coming Spring

"I sweetened the drink."

"You did?" Michał Skalnicky followed up quickly.

"In this room or the other room?" Hipolit inquired.

"In the other room..." said Wanda after a moment's hesitation.

"Why did you sweeten the drink with sugar before you took it in?" Hipolit asked.

"Because that was how Miss Karolina liked it. She liked it sweet."

"How many spoonfuls of sugar did you put in the glass?" said Hipolit insistently.

"Two."

"Are you certain it was sugar and not something else? Perhaps by mistake you put something else instead of sugar in the glass?"

"It was sugar from the sugar bowl."

"You remember clearly?"

"I remember."

"Would you recognize the glass our cousin drank from?"

"Go and look for the glass, my child! It may be around here somewhere! The masters need to be convinced of your innocence..." said Mrs. Turzycka uneasily, though also not without a hint of irony.

"No. Marynia took the tray with the glass away and washed it; you and I already drank coffee from it, auntie. Either you or I drank coffee from that glass."

"Because I must admit we have so few glasses that we're always washing them," Mrs. Turzycka put in pointedly. "The salary of manager of the Nawłoc estate isn't of the kind to allow us to have a dozen glasses, let alone

a chinaware service. We can't afford that sort of thing; we're working people, and our work is very hard and very responsible....," she added with feeling.

"Yes, yes....," said Hipolit. "But perhaps nevertheless you'll be so kind as to show us the jar or bottle from which our cousin poured the juice which the salary of manager of the Nawłóć estate does allow you to manufacture..."

Mrs. Turzycka stood up and trotted into the next room, and then further. Before long she returned with a clear glass bottle half-filled with thick juice. Hipolit asked Miss Wanda for a spoon. When she brought the spoon and gave it to him, Hipolit scowled at her aggressively and implacably. Miss Wanda wore her usual expression of alarm and misery. She handed over the spoon, moved away and stood by the window recess, where she wrapped herself in the lace curtain. Hipolit poured some juice from the bottle onto the spoon and took a little in his mouth. He tasted it appreciatively, finally murmuring:

"The juice is excellent! Well, there's no doubt about it—it can't have been the juice that harmed Karolina. It must have been something else. Isn't that so, uncle?"

"Yes, it must have been something else," muttered Skalnicky, twirling his dark moustache.

In the meantime everyone had been sitting on the sofa and the upholstered armchairs in mortal silence. Maciejunio stood by the door, his clean-shaven chin propped on his hand, listening intently to everything the masters were saying. Cezary was still staring at Miss Wanda. He alone knew of one detail, the time when this

The Coming Spring

listless young lady had put her hand quickly on his when they were playing the piano together. He kept thinking about that moment.

*

The death, autopsy, and burial of Miss Karolina Szarłatowicz made no visible impression whatsoever on Cezary Baryka. When the autopsy revealed traces of the strychnine which had caused her death, and as a result Miss Wanda Okszyńska was summoned to the investigating magistrate and even arrested, then later released for lack of any real evidence against her—all these sensational events, which caused an uproar in the entire neighborhood, scarcely affected him. It could have been maintained that war with its brutality, and before the war the things he had witnessed during the upheavals in Baku, had reduced his sensitivity to the tragic. Cezary had seen too many “sad affairs” of this kind to take them truly to heart. Quite the opposite—tragic events left him dry, indifferent, numb inside, and furthermore they stirred within him a kind of bluster, a cynicism, a capacity for one-upmanship in cruelty and if not an actual criminal instinct, then a certain surrogate for criminality, a snobbery that glorified the capacity for crime. If he had not seen those atrocities of war and revolution, he would have been not just afraid, but terrified of them. The memory of those terrible sights made him look upon lesser events as if they were the pecking of one guinea fowl by another—mere trifles. Was that the worst he had seen? He’d seen an innocent Armenian

girl being raped by a band of burly men, one after another; then the last of them had stuck a knife into her scarcely beating heart. He'd seen the same band afterwards lighting up cigarettes and going on their way singing a song. What was Karusia and the other one compared to that!

In reality, though, it was not the events of war and of revolution Cezary had observed at close range that had such a decisive influence on his disposition, so much as his passionate feelings for Laura Kościeniecka. His fiery love was on such a scale that the events at Nawłóć served him merely as the subject of interesting tidbits to take to his lady. He was happy when he could bring her something straight from the horse's mouth, the latest news: Wanda Okszyńska had been arrested because during the autopsy strychnine had been discovered in Karolina's system. In the course of a search a jar of the same strychnine had been found in manager Turzycki's cupboard. Wanda barely even defended herself; she denied everything and that was an end of it. She knew nothing about anything. She'd never seen the jar of strychnine in her uncle's cupboard. Why would she have put poison in Karolina's glass? But who did put it there? Was it her alone? At the time the maid had not been in the apartment. Turzycki was away at the farm at Chłodek. Two people had been at the manager's home: Mrs. Turzycka and Wanda. Mrs. Turzycka? There was no evidence whatsoever implicating her. Wanda? That young fledgling, that silly goose, that music-mad child who didn't know the first thing about life, that foolish and timorous Wanda? The secret squeeze of the hand which the fool-

The Coming Spring

ish (oh, how very foolish!) Wanda had given him, he didn't mention to anyone. Why should he give himself the laurel wreath, and her the stone of condemnation? Nor was it that exactly; he simply didn't want Laura to be angry with him, or suspicious of him. After all, he hadn't told her or anyone else about the kisses he'd exchanged with Karusia. Why on earth should he say anything about one stupid squeeze of the hand?

In this way Cezary kept conveying new gossip, tales, versions, and rumors to his lady. He saw her secretly, here or there, at a hotel in town or in her house at night. He acted cunningly—so slyly that he could have been called a fox-man, or a coward—the kind of coward who boldly creeps into the chicken coop in the nighttime. But the pitcher goes only so often to the well. In the end the handle broke—and the whole pitcher shattered beyond repair.

It was just before Christmas. Cezary meant to spend the holiday at Nawłóć and then before the New Year return to Warsaw and take up his studies again. The reason he was so set on resuming his studies, in turn, was that Mrs. Kościeniecka was also planning to spend a few weeks in Warsaw during carnival. Mr. Barwicki too meant to travel to Warsaw, but this had little influence on Cezary's enthusiasm for learning. Late one December night, around three o'clock, Cezary slipped out of his room and went to Leniec. As usual, as he ran he took the shortcut across the fields, and thus quickly covered the distance from one estate to the other. The night was calm and dark. There were flurries of snow. Cezary was familiar with the place in the fence where it was easy to

climb over, and so almost at a rush, across the snow-sprinkled earth, he reached the door he knew so well. It was open, and he went in quietly and made his way to the library. But the moment he entered it he sensed that something was amiss. He felt someone else's presence in the room. He stopped, held his breath and strained his ears.

All at once he was dazzled by the beam of an electric flashlight shining in his eyes. At the same moment he heard a swish and felt a terrible pain on his left cheek. It was so intense that Cezary yelped and stooped low, seizing his head in both hands. Then more blows of the stick or whip rained down upon him. The person beating him was standing a single pace away, breathing heavily and cursing. Cezary recognized the voice: It was Barwicki. This fact flashed through his mind. Hatred, stronger than the pain and fueled by it, gave him a strength he had never suspected in himself. He leapt forward, reaching for his opponent with his bare hands. And, waving his arms in the air, groping about in the darkness, he came upon the hunting-crop with which he was being struck. Baryka seized hold of it, tugged at it and pulled it out of his enemy's hand; in a split second he grasped the thin end of the crop next to the loop and began to lash out in the darkness with the thick knob of the handle. He managed to land a blow on his adversary, and evidently hit him in the head, since the latter dropped to the floor with a groan. Cezary found him in the gloom and in a vengeful fury set about kicking him wherever he could—in the head, the ribs, the chest. Now that he held an instrument to administer blows he

The Coming Spring

beat him without pity. Barwicki rose to his knees and grabbed Baryka's legs. A chair crashed to the floor. Both men were now uttering stifled whispers in their hatred, flailing their fists with all their might and rolling about on the carpet in a raging struggle. Suddenly a light appeared.—It was Laura! She was standing on the threshold, a candle in her hand. They stopped fighting and stood up. Laura whispered to Barwicki:

“What are you doing here?”

“I was waiting for your lover. I turned back on the road. I waited here in the library for your pet.”

“For my guest.”

“Who comes at four o'clock in the night.”

“I'm free to receive whomever I wish.”

“And whenever you wish?”

“And whenever I wish.”

“Very well, milady; I'll quit this hospitable roof in just a moment. I merely wanted to leave your guest with a memento he could wear for a few weeks, so he'd know who he was dealing with.”

“You'll be wearing yours too for a good long time!” Baryka laughed.

“I'm magnanimous enough not to call him out. I don't wish to dishonor you.”

“You were spying on me! You've already dishonored me! And for what reason?”

“I don't think you can deny that you deserved the watchfulness of your legal fiancé.”

Mrs. Kościeniecka made no reply. She turned to Cezary:

“How dare you intrude in here at this hour, sir! You see what this has come to! Your reckless advances, your

unsuccessful entreaties, your declarations, and all that nonsense I'm constantly exposed to—it was all very well during the daytime as entertainment, as flirtation. But to dare to enter my home in the middle of the night! To compromise me, to expose me to such a scandal!”

“I told you, ma’am,” responded Baryka, “that I hate your fiancé. Did I or did I not say so? I knew that he kept watch here by night, and I came precisely so as to beat him with his own riding crop. You see it, ma’am? This very crop! It’s his, yet it’s in my hand. I beat him about the head with this handle. Like so!”

In his rage, and ignoring the presence of a woman, Cezary struck Barwicki. The large ball of the handle hit the latter on the side of the head and on the shoulder, so hard that he bent double with a moan. Laura moved to shield him with her own body. She exclaimed:

“How dare you, sir? This is my fiancé!”

“You’d do well to retire to your bedchamber, ma’am, because I’m going to beat him some more. And you’re in my way!”

“Get out of my house, you young pup!” she cried in a theatrical voice.

“Laura!” said Cezary, also assuming a theatrical pose.

“Get out of my house this instant, sir!” she said, begging him with her eyes to leave.

But Cezary was in a frenzy. He didn’t know what he was doing. He turned the crop about momentarily in his hand, took it by its hard round handle, and once and again tried to reach Barwicki behind Laura’s outspread arms. Barwicki, dazed from the previous blow, was staggering at his fiancée’s back.

The Coming Spring

"Mr. Baryka!" she shouted.

"What?"

"Get out of here! Get out! Get out!"

"Fine. I'll go. I just wanted..."

No longer aware of what he was saying, he went on:

"I wanted to give you two lovely, oh-so-proper fiancés my blessing on your new, profitable household."

With this, he lashed Laura across the face and outstretched arms with the riding crop. After which, with the crop still in his hand he left.

*

He wandered about the fields. Happening on a haystack, he dug out a cavity and, rolling up inside it, he moaned and even howled in despair. He could still see the light in the distant mansion at Leniec, and a hundred thousand times he repeated to himself that he would never set foot in it again. There, now, Laura and that man were laughing at him, just as once, wallowing in happiness, he had mocked Barwicki. Who knew, maybe the latter would now begin to brighten the turned-down lamp so it wouldn't be too dark for him in his haystack. By the light of that practical joke he saw his own wretchedness. And now it did not come alone. As is often the case with human misfortune, which, like the wolf, is a solitary creature but one that likes to live in packs, he was encircled by just such a throng. That night, various memories rose up before him: Karolina's death and the crime of the foolish Wanda. Why had those two

women perished? So that Laura could now be with Barwicki. What despair!

Cezary saw his pleasures with Laura, those times when each mouth contained two tongues of delight; and he felt, felt with all his senses at once, with the madness of his reason and the agony of his soul, that he had lost her forever. Who in the devil's name had raised his arm so he should strike Laura with it! It was Karolina who had hit Laura in the face with the riding crop! How could he himself have committed such a hideous act, such a crime, such a base, villainous gesture! To strike a weak, frail woman in the face with a riding crop! To strike Laura! To strike the woman who had placed a thousand kisses on his lips! To strike those lips! How despicable, how shameful! To strike her because with her body she was protecting a man from the blows of a hard leaden ball to the temple—whoever that man might be! The man had had nothing with which to defend himself. He was only half-conscious. It was hellish! It was horrible!

Cezary writhed in his pit of straw and blocked his mouth with his fists so as not to roar with pain across all the empty fields. Oh, the memories, the memories of a paradise which he himself had destroyed forever with a single blow! Memories of an evening in an unfamiliar town, where he had knocked on the door of a hotel room. An unforgettable memory, bringing eternal joy, for the door opened and a shapely arm, naked from hand to shoulder, pulled him inside...How could he forget the rapture of the first embrace and of that flight through heavens of tenderness, goodness, warmth, and

The Coming Spring

the purest, most essential love? Relinquish Laura? He would rather die! He would rather smash his head so it could contain no thought of renouncing that gift of the heavens, that masterpiece of earth, that highest and purest beauty the earth had ever brought forth from its loins! Cezary wept.

He cried for a long time, unable to control himself. Now he was set about by those three women as if by three witches. He had met them here without knowing that he would, and he had wronged all three like a scoundrel. For one he had become a *porte-malheur*, for the second the inspiration for a crime, and the third he had raised his hand to. The last because she loved him to distraction. What should he do with himself? How could he escape from the hell of his own conscience? What action should he take? How could he rehabilitate himself in his own eyes? Where could he run to get away from himself?

He crawled out of his den and raised his clenched fists in the direction of Laura's mansion. He shook these fists and declared:

"You'll regret our secret evenings together as long as you live! You'll shed an ocean of tears for driving me out of your home instead of him! You'd drive *me* out? I was right to whip you! You're a coward; you're oh so provident, thinking of business, wily, artful, contemptible! So he'll pay off the debts on your estate? And I'm thrown out! I'm thrown out? I'm only good for clandestine pleasures, while he's the official spouse! You'll die of longing for me; you'll gnaw your knuckles just as I'm doing right now! But our joy is all gone now. How can I

go back, go back to you—me, a man, a soldier who struck you in the presence of another man? I have to go back to the outside world!”

But instead of going to that “outside world” he returned to his hollow in the hay. He tore off a few handfuls of dry grass and fashioned himself a makeshift bed. He wrapped himself in hay and, accustomed from his wartime experiences to sleeping on the ground, he stretched out on his back.

It was cold. After the calm night, towards morning a dry, freezing wind had blown up across the fields. A fine snow swirled and imperceptibly covered everything. Cezary saw and heard the biting winter wind passing over the deserted meadows and across the frozen fields into the distance. His soul was like ploughed land in which any seed could take root. He was unable to sleep because his whole body was trembling and his heart was beating rapidly, strong and hollow. In addition the blow to the cheek that Barwicki had given him was now swollen like an abscess. Cezary felt the cheek with his fingers and found what seemed to be a bulging ridge all the way across his face. How could he appear at Nawłóć now? Go back there, and sit down at breakfast with this welt on his face? Anyone would know that someone had struck him. The old aunts, Mrs. Wielosławska, Skalnicky, the little cleric, Hipolit—oh, Hipolit!—and even Maciejunio. Everyone would think: “So, my friend! You got it in the mug, alternatively in the gob...”

There was nothing for it! He had to run away. To run away to the outside world! To the big world outside!

The Coming Spring

And in this way, lying on his back upon a pile of hay on the bare, frozen earth, Cezary felt that he was again alone, just as he had been once in Baku. He felt that other than himself there was nothing at all, while before him lay unknown and lifeless fields across which the wind was blowing from one end of the earth to the other. But to this place of solitude his father, alas, would no longer come, driven by love, that mysterious force, from one end of the earth to the other. For he was gone. He was sleeping like a stone, lying like a clod of earth frozen to the mute field. Here, on his path he had found friendship, hospitality, goodwill. Everything had been trodden into the dirt by his furious feet. And once again he was all alone, as he had been in Baku, separate from everyone, a man apart, in the open fields.

The passing wind became good and affectionate toward him: It sang him its bitter song of eternal death and eternal return to life. It took his wounded feelings upon its wings and bore them somewhere as it bore fertile seeds; and it rocked him to sleep like his last friend. But sleep did not come to his eyes from the wind's unvarying song. The cold was taking his hands and feet in its grip, creeping under his clothing and running up his back with a shiver. Cezary jumped up and ran out into the fields. His eyes, grown used to the darkness, could see the cultivated strips of land, the furrows, the tufts of stalks on the boundary ridges, and the trees in the distance.

At a certain moment a rumble came from the direction of Leniec. The light from a lantern could be seen moving at a steady pace: It was Barwicki leaving the

place. Ha! So then? Maybe he could go to Laura now... The other man had already left. One leaves, another comes. It happens! He gave a foolish laugh, like a werewolf in the bare fields, and ran on. In Laura's window, in the large semicircular bay on the second floor, the light spread, growing brighter, then slowly dimmed. No! He'd no longer go to her after the other man, to beg for her love! Those oaths and declarations proclaiming that he alone possessed her heart meant nothing. She was deceiving both of them. That was the only thing that was certain.

On his way he found himself at the place where it was easy to cross the fence into the garden. He entered the Leniec orchard and, almost completely unaware of where he was and what was happening to him, found himself at the door through which he always entered the house.

He tried the handle. The door was locked. He rounded the building, stood beneath the window, in which the light had already gone out, and with all the force of his soul he called beseechingly:

"Laura! Laura!"

But the entire house maintained a scornful silence. The window was closed. And the whole earth too was silent. He shook his head and walked away. He returned to the fields and for a long time wandered aimlessly, bearing within himself the naked, rank agony of rejection. He found himself in the woods. The rustle of the pine trees brought him relief, as if it were profound and exquisite music. He sat down there, among the pines, on a tree stump that stuck out of the snow. He took his

The Coming Spring

head in his hands and gazed at the story of his emotional life. Long hours went by before he roused himself. Day was breaking. A whitish blue light filled the wood. The wind had died down again and an inscrutable silence lay over those places.

Cezary left the wood and looked about him. It seemed to him that he had never been here before. In any case he had never seen this wood, though he had traveled the whole neighborhood on horseback and on foot. He realized that he had strayed beyond the farming village of Nawłóć, to its south, between the manor and the church. Nearby were some bushes and trees. He went in that direction, guessing there must be a road there. Soon, leaping over the frozen crops, he came to the bushes. It was the Nawłóć cemetery, which lay between the manor and the village.

The cemetery was poorly fenced, or rather not fenced at all. Fence-posts still stood that had once been finely beveled and now were rotten and falling to pieces. On the ground lay the cross-bars, decayed and covered with snow. Cezary decided to cut diagonally across the cemetery, especially because beneath the snow a path or walkway could be discerned. He recalled that he had been here quite recently, at Karolina Szarłatowicz's funeral. He stopped and looked around. A country cemetery! Tiny, low, ever so low little graves. Little hillocks, sometimes patted smooth with a spade and at times, in the spring, surrounded by grass. Elsewhere were depressions that had subsided into the earth. Here and there a wooden cross bearing a wreath of fragrant herbs. At times there appeared an inscription on a tin plate, the

given and family names written in black paint with amusing spelling mistakes and a plea for a prayer that no one would ever heed. The very image of the country. Here there were small, flat graves; while among them, right in the middle of the cemetery, were marble monuments with gilt inscriptions, broken granite pillars and white angels with blackened faces and corroded eyes. Here lay the masters. In the very center was the family tomb of the Wielosławskis—massive, sumptuous, weighed down by quantities of marble plates which the rain had furrowed as it did the soil in the fields. Cezary went up to this family tomb. It was here that earth had been dug away from the side, the brick wall had been opened and into the black void of putrefaction they had put Karusia, the smiling and cheerful one, whose lips had been sweeter than cherries and raspberries.

Cezary followed the path that led across the cemetery to the gate hanging off its hinges. It made no difference to him whether he went one way or the other. He remembered that by the family tomb there was a wooden bench where Mrs. Wielosławska used to sit when she went to pray at her husband's grave. Someone was sitting on the bench now. Cezary paused. The other man raised his stooped head. It was Father Anastazy. In his cassock and blue cap of the kind that boys wear in that part of the country, he blended in with the colors of the stone and marble, the boulders and ironwork of the tombs.

"Good morning, Cezary!" he said in a voice that was not his own. "Where are you coming from, and where are you going to, so early in the morning?"

"I wanted to visit Karolina."

The Coming Spring

"Me too. I visit her every morning on my way to mass. But I don't want to bother you. Go ahead and pray."

"Praying is your business, father."

"It is. But for me it's official as it were, a professional duty. Whereas in your case you especially ought to pray."

"I know myself whether I need to pray or not."

"Other than you, my friend, I'm the only other person who knows that you ought to."

"To the best of my knowledge, you're obliged to respect the confidentiality of confession."

"Unquestionably. But here not a living soul can hear us. Take heed, though—the dead are listening to us! She's listening too—your victim."

"What victim? This is stuff and nonsense!"

"She was mortally in love with you. It's entirely like a young girl; it's entirely human. And you? You didn't love her, because you were in love, but with another; then why did you kiss her?"

"I felt like it. It's entirely like boys to kiss beautiful girls."

"But you kissed an innocent girl, an orphan, a homeless exile who here, in our home, put in a hard and honest day's work to earn her keep. Listen to me, you apostate—she was a gentlewoman! You see how God smote her for those kisses with just anyone! You posture here with your Muscovite barbarity. Fall on your knees this instant at her grave and ask for forgiveness."

"This is my business and my reckoning with her...I didn't ask you for advice or for any of your Catholic-gentry tips."

"That pose of yours won't get you anywhere with me! It's precisely my job to break down impenitent consciences. And I won't forgive you yours!"

"My conscience is clear. I could have seduced her if I'd wanted. I didn't do her any wrong. My kisses gave her pleasure. She came after them herself. I'm sure she cried and suffered when I refused to give her more."

"Silence! Silence! Silence! I don't want to hear it! If you want to speak to me of this of your own accord, then it shouldn't be here. Come with me! I'll put on my surplice and stole, sit in the confessional and hear you out. You'll cast a great weight from your heart. If I can I'll absolve you. I guarantee by the eternally living God, Czarus my friend, that you'll feel relief in your heart!"

Cezary gave a spirited laugh. Through his laughter he said:

"Not a chance that you'll catch me with your lasso, my little padre! I'm a wild pony. We can eat together, spin yarns, get smashed too, because that's something you like, and you know more than I do about the quality of dishes and the contents of alcoholic drinks. But what gives you the right, with qualifications like those, to rule over such a subtle organism as a human conscience, as my conscience?"

"Because you see, apart from being a gourmand and liking a tippie, apart from the fact that I'm fond of merrymaking and laughter and jokes, I'm also a humble and faithful servant of God."

"I know it. But I'm not of this parish. Not of this one, not of any."

The Coming Spring

"In that case you walk the earth among the quiet and good children of the Lord like a malign aggressor, and death and murder lie in your footsteps, though your gait is free, innocent, light, truly boyish."

"Never mind that. I'll get by somehow."

"Who mistreated you so unkindly? You've a livid weal on your face."

"I fell down on the way and hurt my cheek."

"*Tiens!* You see, your footing isn't so sure. You fall down too. You walk unsurely."

"My steps aren't guided by that excellent priestly principle: Give orders in the deepest humility and obey orders with infinite pride. I go my own way. And yet somehow I seem to manage."

"May God forgive you everything. And may He protect you from evil. I have to go to the church now. Stay here—and weep at this tomb, in the quiet of your soul."

"*Farceur!*"³⁴ muttered Cezary.

The priest gave no reply. He walked rapidly away.

*

Cezary sneaked back to his room, his face covered so no one should see the mark of the riding crop. He wrapped his face in a handkerchief, curled up in his bed and fell sound asleep. He slept the whole day and into the night. He was woken by a light in the room and the

³⁴ "Clown!" (French).

sound of footsteps. It was Hipolit Wielosławski; he was standing over the bed. Cezary raised his head reluctantly.

"Cezary! What's wrong with you? You've not had anything to eat or drink..."

"I was asleep."

"Fine. But have something brought to you at least. What would you like?"

"Ask them to bring me some tea. I'm not feeling too well; I can't come to the table."

"There's no point in going to the table; everyone's long left for bed. But Maciejunio can scrounge something up for you."

"There's no need! I swear there's no need! I can wait till tomorrow."

"What's wrong with you, friend? What are you hiding there on your face?"

"I was walking through the park yesterday evening. A branch hit me on the cheek."

"Funny branch, that happened to get you on the cheek. Even branches slap people in the face around here. They have old-fashioned notions of honor in these parts!"

"That's true. Notions of honor around here are a bit too old-fashioned."

"Czaruś, my friend!" Hipolit suddenly exclaimed reproachfully, "why are you hiding from me! I don't want to impose myself on you, since you're hiding."

"I'm not hiding! I've been sleeping."

"Come on, I can see that you're concealing some kind of distress. There's something going on around you that I don't understand. I've heard all kinds of nonsense,

The Coming Spring

even some foul things. I don't believe any of it. And now this weal on your face..."

"Let me be!"

"We were soldiers together, side by side in the trench!" Hipolit said with tears in his eyes, grasping his comrade's hand. "I got to know you inside out; neither of us had any secrets from one another. Each of us followed the other as if he were following himself. In a word, either of us would have laid down his life for the other. And now you're here in my home, on my ground, wrestling with some foe, and I'm no longer a brother to you in all this. That hurts, Baryka!"

"There are things that can't be disclosed to anyone, even to oneself."

"I don't have anything that I couldn't disclose to you. I mean, it's not as if you're stealing horses or brawling on a public street!"

"Well, almost, actually..."

"Don't be ridiculous! I'll tell you one thing: If you've got some conflict, if you're at odds with someone, if some misfortune's come upon you that's more than you can bear, some terrible adversity...Whoever the matter concerns, whatever it's about—I'm at your side! One word and I'll fight just as you would fight with your own hands! If you need a second, a deputy, an alter ego, a go-between—whatever the matter's about—I'm your man!"

"Thank you, Hip! I know, I really do. But there is no matter."

"Who hit you in the face?"

"A branch in the park."

"You don't want me here?"

“No.”

“I understand. I won’t impose myself on you any more.”

“Hipolit, my brother! Let me be alone.”

“That means that between us we no longer have what we had in the trenches.”

“I’ll just say one thing: in the trenches there were no beautiful women. Don’t ask me anything else. You’ll have to imagine the rest, because I can’t say any more. It’s a secret.”

“A secret that all the little birdies hereabouts have been chirruping from the rooftops.”

“Really?”

“What do you think! Here I am, wanting to stand by your side, protect you, fight to left and right...Whatever you command...And you tell me pompously: ‘It’s a secret!’”

“I do have one big request.”

“Whatever you want!”

“Let me go away for a week or two to that little farm at Chłodek. I’d like to be on my own, not to see even you...I don’t want anyone to set eyes on me. I’d like this mug of mine to heal, and to spend the time thinking about everything that’s been going on around me here. Right now I can neither be here, nor return to the city. Inside me there’s a muddle, a big muddle...”

“I’ll make the arrangements today. You’ll have a room there. But it’ll be small, simple, rough. There aren’t any luxuries there.”

Cezary was unable to speak. He reached out his hand to his friend. Hipolit took the hand and shook it for a long time. In the end he let go with a groan:

The Coming Spring

“To Chłodek, alone...Oh, you fool! You colossal ass! You squandered Karusia! Here in the family we’d discussed finding a way to provide for Karusia. We’d decided to give her Chłodek as part of her dowry. It seemed that you liked her. It was my dream that you’d get married and move in to Chłodek. I thought we’d be neighbors for the rest of our lives. Oh, you fool!...”

*

Early the next morning, before anyone was up in the manor at Nawłóć, Cezary moved to Chłodek. He did not say goodbye to anyone—since Karolina’s death he had not been looked upon favorably by the members of the household. Hipolit accompanied him in person and “handed him over” to Gruboszewski the manager. Having completed this operation in an official and almost legalistic manner, he left at once on his small sleigh. Cezary looked askance at Mr. Gruboszewski while the latter coughed, stroked his huge walrus mustache and studied his guest. Finally he invited him inside with a not especially hospitable gesture:

“Please come in, sir...”

The interior of the house was right there, almost on the exterior. It was separated from the outside world, the wind, the rain, and excessive frosts by whitewashed larchwood walls that were so very warped with age that each wall was not vertical but corrugated. From a small verandah one entered a hallway paved with flat stone slabs; from the hallway an ancient, low fitted door led into a sizeable room with several windows. The floor in

this chamber was equally undulating, lying as it did directly upon the earth. From the cracks between the ancient floorboards soil emerged during the foul weather of autumn and the winter thaws, while the great downpours of summer ran across said floorboards, because, alas, the rotting, moldering bottom plates could not hold them back as they had in times past. In the large "living room" there stood old furniture with tattered upholstery. On the walls were landscapes so blackened and covered with dust that it was truly hard to say why they were still hanging on their rusty nails, since they depicted no scenery nor anything anyone could make out. A large black table on crumbling legs constituted as it were the focal point of the house. On it there already stood coffee in a small pot and cream in a white enamel jug; there was also a loaf of bread set about symmetrically with a butter dish and a sugar bowl that was a beautiful relic of times gone by, and ancient knives smoothed by sharpening and cutting, and forks with broken tines. Mr. Gruboszewski, who was just as ancient as everything else in his home, took Cezary's suitcase from him and carried it through into a small adjoining room with a single window. There he carefully set the case down by a large ash-wood bed that was made up with splendid-looking pillows and a blue silk counterpane.

"We only have two rooms, your excellency," explained Mr. Gruboszewski, "so please make yourself comfortable in here. My wife and I will be in the other room, the first one."

"Please, sir! I'm nobody's 'excellency'; my name is simply Baryka. I'm sorry to be causing you this upheaval."

“Oh, nothing of the sort!” said Gruboszewski insincerely. “A guest in the home is like God in the home”³⁵,” he added, quite untruthfully, even deceitfully, this time.

“Have you and your wife lived here at Chłodek long?” asked Cezary, for want of anything else to say.

“Thirty-five years, sir. It’ll soon be thirty-six since we started work here. We’ve gone and grown old in this one place. We’re overgrown with moss like the rocks in the fields hereabouts.”

“Yes, that’s a fair stretch of time.”

“Nothing’s been changed in the house in all those years. The same walls, the same beams, the same roof, the same furniture. The place is as old as the hills. On one of the beams in the other room there’s an inscription: *Anno Domini 1782*. On the verandah there are four pillars. One of them’s a bit dodgy; if you give it a poke with your finger the wood just crumbles. It’s been on the point of collapse for twenty-four years. Everyone in these parts knows about it—keep your distance from that pillar, or it could come down on you like a ton of bricks!”

“So why don’t you just reinforce it with a good strong board-nail?”

“It’s not my house. There aren’t any instructions regarding the matter. I don’t have a handy ladder. Besides, the pillar’s held out for years. How much grain have I sent to the granaries of the masters from Nawłóć in that time! Who could measure it all! How much flour has been ground in the mill here!”

³⁵ A Polish proverb.

At this point breakfast was announced. At this breakfast, which was just like the ones in the manor at Nawłóć and was accompanied by the same formalities, the role of Maciejunio was performed by Mrs. Gruboszewska, a personage in a close-fitting black dress and a black cap over her gray and, shall we say, receding hair; she was a thin, bony woman whose appearance gave Cezary something of a fright. He was invited to sit down and urged to eat his fill even more insistently than at Nawłóć.

Cezary, however, was looking for a more humble kind of life, for life itself. He disclosed as much to Mr. Gruboszewski. The latter did not fully understand. A person who lived within the very essence of life, a person of unadorned facts and unadorned business, could not understand that someone might be seeking the essence of life. But the person doing the seeking was a friend of Mr. Hipolit, the lord of the manor, and so he was entitled to seek whatever he wanted. Mr. Gruboszewski, a man who lived within life's essence, saw in this seeker after its essence quite simply an inspector sent by the manor to check up on the abuses of an aging manager—a secret observer and informer, and even a candidate for the position of manager at Chłodek, his potential replacement. And so he watched the newcomer and waited. Just in case, he ministered to his guest in the traditional way, plying him with food and drink, whoever he might be in that essence of his. It's always easier to deal with a fellow who's had something to eat, especially tasty things that can't be had in any old city.

The Coming Spring

Immediately after breakfast Cezary turned to his host and offered his assistance with any kind of writing, book-keeping, paperwork, record-keeping, or accounts. This put manager Gruboszewski in a much worse frame of mind.

"Look at him! The fine fellow!" he said to himself. "He's already grubbing around in the papers and books and accounts! It'll take more than that for me to show you the 'paperwork'!"

"There isn't a whole lot of paperwork!" he sighed aloud. "We don't do much writing. Everything's in the eyes and in the fingers. Everything's above board and honest. Of course, we write down the accounts and the records, naturally! Orderliness is the most important thing here at Chłodek! It's been thirty-five years already, with the Lord's blessing, going on thirty-six. Naturally I can show you the books..."

"There's no hurry. When the opportunity arises. To-day I'd like to take a look at the farm, the mill, and the village. I'd like to talk with people, listen to what they have to say and how they say it..."

At this point Gruboszewski was left in no doubt whatsoever that before him stood a man who wished to oust him from his job, kick him out of his position at Chłodek and "send him packing." Despair seethed in the poor fellow's noggin.

"And what can have happened to leave such a mark across your face? Is that from the war?"

"No. I fell on the stairs one night and hurt myself badly..."

Mrs. Gruboszevska immediately began recommending the application of various medications; she advo-

cated in particular a salve of fresh wax, olive oil, turpentine and something or other. She even toddled off briskly to the pantry beyond the large kitchen to prepare such an ointment according to an old recipe; it was called *unguentum* in Latin and her father—God rest his soul!—had used it widely with the peasants.

Before she came back with the ointment, Cezary had talked Gruboszewski into taking a walk to the mill and round the farm buildings. The mill was old, of the kind that were rife on Polish rivers and ponds if not in the times of the Piasts or the Jagiellon kings, then for sure under the elected King Stefan Batory.³⁶ In that rickety old construction there was even something of beauty in the way that, in an age of aeroplanes and wireless telegraphy, it made do without iron, being constructed in the ancient fashion, of stone and wood alone. Its original wooden machinery—undershot wheels and rod wheels, rollers, boxes, millstones, riddles, sieves, and bolters—were ingenious inventions of carpenters, stone masons and sieve makers; they were “devices” imposed long, long ago by the genius of a farming village upon the forces of an untamed local river and the hardness of life-giving grain.

Baryka had to occupy himself with these external phenomena and as it were compel himself to think about them, in order to overcome the torment of his

³⁶ The Piast dynasty ruled from the 12th to the 14th centuries, and the Jagiellon kings from the 14th to the 16th centuries. Stefan Batory or Bathory (reigned 1576–1586), a Hungarian, was one of Poland’s first elected monarchs.

The Coming Spring

memories and the incitements of his longing. He walked or ran about, conversed, asked questions, examined, pondered, laughed, and joked; while all the time, over his head there roared the terror of an unleashed storm. In a cheerful and friendly manner he made the acquaintance of Sylwester the miller, and chatted with the villagers as they waited for their wholemeal flour and their bran; and all the while his raging heart hammered in his chest like a prisoner condemned to death. Casual references in conversation—"That farmer over there's from near Leniec, and that other one's from Ognicha, on the Odolany road"—tossed him like a powerless scrap into a yawning pit of hollow despair. And so all the more earnestly and doggedly did he converse, take an interest, inquire, scrutinize, and enter into the essence of things.

Sylwester, the old miller there at Chłodek, had worked in that very same mill for several decades now, having been hired even before Gruboszewski. Never mind Gruboszewski—he'd been there under the previous manager, Przesławski. Everyone thereabouts knew him, he used to say, on either side of Jasna Góra. And he had a pair of lungs on him! He really did yell across the entire neighborhood—every word of his could be heard over all the bushels, gears, rods and bolters as they spoke in their own language. Sylwester would grunt and out of the corner of his eye would observe the young newcomer about whose secret mission "mannidger" Gruboszewski had already informed him in a whisper. And so he talked even more booming, but in a crafty, cunning, unctuous manner. There were always crowds of villagers in the mill—well-off farmers and impover-

ished smallholders, who gazed avariciously at Sylwester's whimsical, ingenious machinery, worried that it might be skimming off too much flour and bran.

Cezary was taken aback by his conversations with the villagers. They listened when he told them this and that about the war. Their sons, brothers, and relatives had served too. But when he came back to peacetime matters, for the most part they did not understand him and he did not understand them. It wasn't even that they did not understand him: they had no interest in him, and what he had to say bored them. They liked to talk and listen only about what was local, real, visible, touchable, so touchable and local that he in turn did not understand. Everything had to be based on an example from that region, everything had to have taken place here and be connected to local relations. Otherwise it was alien, distant, foreign, from another world, and so of no interest. Everything they talked about and took an interest in concerned food and drink, or revolved around firewood and clothing, surviving the winter and the time before the new harvest, or waiting for the next summer. And next summer and fall it would be the same: to manage to extract enough from the cruel, hard earth so as to have food for the whole winter and not to starve, to make it to the new harvest—and so on and so forth—till “the new one.”

At a certain moment during these exchanges about food and winter clothes, Cezary felt a stab of rage: “What kind of animal life is this you're living, you strong and healthy people! Some of you have so much food you've turned it into a cult, a rite, an obsession, some-

The Coming Spring

thing sacred; while others live only so as not to drop dead of hunger! You strong fellows, you ought to rebel against your wretched fate!" thought Cezary as he sat on a soft sack of bran. This thought, this inner thunderclap, was a kind of mental force countering the storm that raged over the weaknesses of his soul.

He would stay in the mill until dinner time, talking intently with the peasants the whole time. Afterwards, immediately before dinner, he would walk round the stables, the cattle sheds and barns, and the granary, poking into the tiniest details like a true detective.

*

He spent two weeks at Chłodek as a guest of the Gruboszewskis, and was suspected the whole time of having designs on the position of manager. He ate, drank, slept and worked from morning till night. What did he do? He carried out various strenuous tasks. Each day he rose in the morning, that is to say, in the middle of the dark December night, along with Mr. Gruboszewski. He went to sleep with the chickens, that is to say, around five in the afternoon. Each day he was in a different place—at the mill, on the threshing floor as the flails were being used, and during the winnowing, the measuring, and the warehousing of the prepared grain—in the forest, where they were chopping yards of wood for firewood—among the fishermen catching fish for Christmas Eve—and in the cattle sheds during the evening and morning milking. On top of this he wandered about the countryside, stopping by at the cottages

of the farmers he had recently gotten to know. He investigated in particular the lives of the landless tenant farmers, of whom there were a great many in the neighboring villages that lay on the hills surrounding Chłodek in its valley.

The tenants were peasants and their families who possessed no land but instead lived, as it were, under the roofs of farmers who were mostly smallholders but nevertheless had their own piece of land with their own cottages, barns, and cattle byres. The tenants earned a living in the manors, serving as stable-hands or day laborers; they also worked as hired hands and ploughmen on the more well-to-do, better-run and better equipped farms owned by the wealthier farmers. The lives of these tenants were beggarly beyond description. In the summer they left to make money in more prosperous neighborhoods. Once, before the "great wars," they had migrated en masse beyond the Slavic lands into the German heartland, on a "tour of Germany." During the wars their numbers grew and they filled the villages and the impoverished hamlets. The wars did not wipe them out but, on the contrary, made them proliferate—without giving them any more than they had before. Many of them had bled, received wounds, and been crippled in the struggle for the freedom of the Polish nation; but their homeland, which had recently become a new country, had not yet managed to do anything for them, occupied as it was with widespread poverty and the ongoing conflict with an external enemy. They waited patiently in their corners, by someone else's hearth, sleeping on benches and beside stoves, with no

The Coming Spring

home that was theirs nor anything else to call their own. There were hordes of such people in the villages, among the owners and half-owners—throngs of them, crowds of them. They stumbled along the roads like beggars, roaming aimlessly about courtyards in search of something to do. How terrible was their winter! What monstrous sicknesses they were prey to! What agonies the women of that clan of pariahs suffered when their offspring was struck down by smallpox or that even worse illness which constricts the throat and asphyxiates the infant³⁷ like a merciless, cowardly marten killing off all the little chicks in the henhouse.

Through cracks in the doors of small barns he saw old men and women cast out of heated cottages by their healthy children and grandchildren and left to die in the frost and snowstorms, laid out on a sheaf of straw so as to “get it over with” as quickly as possible—to stop them tormenting the overworked and hungry living with their coughing, their hacking up of blood, and their unending groans. He wondered at that primal, barbaric ruthlessness, which is the inevitable economy of life—of the kind of life there was in the country.

Here, before his eyes was the other pole of the ways in which human life is organized in the world. Gazing at an old woman writhing on her sheaf of straw in the barn, despite everything unable to die, nor equally to live under such conditions, he remembered his own mother and her final hours. There, in a world organized by the

³⁷ A reference to diphtheria.

most socially desirable ideals, things were done more quickly, and death was aided more effectively. Cezary lingered among the inhabitants of the villages, observed their labor and their rest, and peered into their pots boiling on someone else's stove, to find out what they ate. He passed through the Nawłóć woods, watching the underfed juvenile tatterdemalions and *sans-culotte* and the shriveled, sickly old women breaking off dry branches and then carrying bundles of them on their backs, staggering under the burden as they crossed the snow-covered flatlands so as to be able to warm their hands and cook up some grub on a blessed fire in the bitter cold. Truly, when the harsh Polish gale blew, it sometimes made his heart break. It broke so thoroughly and profoundly that for a moment his own woes receded.

He ate *Wilia* or Christmas Eve dinner³⁸ with Mr. Gruboszewski the manager and his wife, in the company of their family—sons, sons-in-law, daughters, and their offspring, all of whom traveled from various places to their parents' home at Chłodek. He had not wished to spend this occasion at Nawłóć, even though the weal on his face had long since healed and only a slight lividness indicated that there had once been a serious cut there. It was in vain that Hipolit Wielosławski came repeatedly to Chłodek, and in vain that he took his friend for walks and begged him to come to Nawłóć. It did no good.

³⁸ In Polish culture the major meal of the Christmas period and one of the most important celebrations of the year.

The Coming Spring

It was during one such visit of Hipolit's that a piece of news was casually dropped into the conversation:

"Oh, I almost forgot to mention, Czarus: did you hear that our beautiful neighbor, Mrs. Laura, is already Mrs. Barwicka?"

"No, it's the first I've heard of it..." murmured Cezary, feeling his heart and the blood in his veins turn to ice.

"Well, she is! They sent news of the wedding."

"Where? What wedding?"

"They wrote from Kraków. They got some sort of dispensation for an earlier ceremony. The announcement came on a card, all splendidly printed, with titles and family trees. I can bring it and show you if you like."

"What use is it to me?"

"I thought you'd be interested."

"The hell with all that!" muttered Cezary, and changed the subject.

But the news afflicted his heart. Now all his secret hopes were extinguished. It was the end of all his underground dreams, cultivated in the darkness despite everything. He was stifled by the enormity of the fact and the manifestness of Barwicki's triumph.

Cezary had to "work" twice as hard. He walked or ran around, intruded, nosed about, spied, and eavesdropped. He learned the deepest secrets of the lives of the poor. But one day he rose while it was still completely dark and announced to Mr. Gruboszewski that he had had enough, and would no longer be loitering about there. He was leaving for the city. He was going to go back to his dissecting room and his cadavers. Mr. Gruboszewski

was as pleased as if someone had given him the whole of Chłodek for his own. To some cadavers somewhere or other? There's a thing! He should have said from the beginning that this was all about romance and philosophy!

Cezary wrote Hipolit a note asking for horses to the local train station. Before the horses came he gathered his belongings and packed his suitcase; bidden a fond, spirited farewell, he rode off to Nawłóć. Mrs. Wielosławska, the decrepit old aunts, Uncle Skalnicky and Maciejunio (Father Anastazy had already left for his parish, where he was serving as curate)—in a word everyone said goodbye to him with a sorrow in which nevertheless there was no mourning for this guest. They looked at him out of the corner of their eye and wished him a bitter farewell.

"Be well, guest," their expressions said. "Our roof was your roof, and our door was open to you, but you were a strange visitor; God be with you!"

It remained to say goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Turzycki, who had performed many a service for him. Cezary would just as well have avoided this visit, but there was no getting out of it.

The huge, splendid black team horses, hitched to a tiny sleigh with a bearskin throw, were pawing at the ground in front of the Arianka and kicking the snow aside as they strained to be off. The visit, then, could not be a long one. Cezary tarried a moment. He kissed Mrs. Turzycka's hand, made some complimentary remarks or other and exchanged kisses with the man of the house. Then he ran downstairs.

The Coming Spring

But just as he was about to leave the great hallway, he turned and glanced up the stairs. Lurking deep in the alcove, and leaning over the balustrade, was Wanda Ok-szyńska. She had a pale, greenish color, like the white-washed wall next to which she was crouching. She looked gaunt and somehow old. Her eyes, ringed with black, were fixed on Mr. Czarus, who had had such a momentous impact on her life. Seeing that he was looking her way, she nodded twice to him. And when he gave a bow from a distance and ran out with suitcase in hand, she hung over the balustrade. She closed her eyes and squeezed further into the recess. Her wretched head was supported only by the freezing wall; it sobered her with its merciful chill.

Jędrek could barely hold onto the reins of the black horses. They rode like a storm down the middle of the avenue. At the end Jędrek turned to his master and asked:

“Straight ahead or by Leniec?”

“As you wish. We’re in plenty of time for the train.”

“The straight roads aren’t easy going. There are snowdrifts in the lanes, and it’s hard to keep control of the horses. We may come to grief on the lanes if the horses start jumping about...”

“Then we’ll go via Leniec. Let’s move! But don’t you dare use the whip! Just a flick of the reins...”

The horses bore the sleigh along the broad road. Cezary raised his eyes and gazed at the neighborhood, where he had known such raptures and such joy, and which was now the mirror of such grief. What on earth had happened in this land! The local farms were swathed

in a blueish mist against the background of the white snow, and their outlines conveyed a wintry image of life in those parts: mournful, alien, careworn. How different they were, those foreign souls; how dismal the chalice of recent felicity! Here were the wild pear trees that he had passed in his happiness. Here was the wood. Here were the roadside plants that had known how to sing their own love song in accompaniment to the envious song of his soul.

“Leniec!”

Cezary stared at the mansion through half-closed eyes. He absorbed for the last time the shape of the large upstairs window, and the colors of the garden. The curtains in the window were closed; this meant the lady of the house was not there.

He couldn't help it: great, lonely tears, held back behind his eyelids with all his strength, now streamed down his cheeks. Hipolit Wielosławski pretended not to see them. He chatted with Jędrek. He got angry about something, and shouted his usual: “Hold onto the right-hand horse, hold on!” But he put a strong soldierly arm round Cezary's shoulders and, on the pretext of ensuring that his friend shouldn't fall from the narrow seat, clasped him with all his strength to his chest.

PART THREE

The Wind from the East

U pon his return to Warsaw Cezary Baryka enrolled once more in his medical studies and took up residence, at his own invitation, in the room of one of his fellow students, a certain Buławnik. This Buławnik came from a line of innkeepers or small-town profiteers, as a result of which he was always “in the money.” He lived, however, in a remote and entirely Jewish neighborhood, on Miła Street, in a dingy, crumbling apartment building whose stairs were so filthy, and the walls of whose entranceway were so blackened by the fumes of gas lamps, that it would have required a truly angelic goodness of heart to look upon them without gnashing one’s teeth. The room was on the fourth floor of this peeling ruin. Buławnik’s residence was accessed through the apartment of a sizeable number of rather malodorous and unkempt old ladies. On entering his room one was immediately struck by a leaky corner in the ceiling and an unwholesome smell rising from beneath the floor. Upon making inquiries with the caretaker, alternatively the concierge, about this matter, Cezary heard the following declaration:

“Of course there’s a leak—it’s hardly surprising when there’s a whopping great hole in the ceiling right there in

The Coming Spring

the corner. It's so big a sheep could crawl through it into the attic."

"Why is there a whopping great hole? The whole point of having a roof is so there won't be holes that sheep can crawl through into the attic."

"Sir!" the caretaker, alternatively the concierge, said in an ironic tone. "That's all well and good, but these days there are more important things to worry about than holes in the roof. You'll just have to live there and make do."

"I understand, sir. But there's also an unpleasant smell coming up from the under the floor. What do you think's causing that?"

"There's a smell from the floor because it's a gable wall. The beam's got dry rot and the joists too. It's no surprise that there's dry rot, since it's a gable wall, especially if you take into consideration the fact that it's a corner room too."

Having received this explanation Cezary, instructed and fortified in spirit, ceased worrying about anything. He lived there and made do. But he did not like the room. Perhaps ten years before the Great War it had been painted the color of tomato soup. It was small, uncomfortable, and excessively draughty. What blew from the window and door, moreover, was not clean air but the smell of certain indispensable toilets which were located far down on the ground floor, it was true, but right underneath the window of the room. Furthermore, just beyond the outside wall there was the tin chimney of a bakery, which blasted constant streams of dull-colored smoke into the students' window. At night there

could be heard the interminable clatter of bread carts being pushed by hand from where the ovens were, making the thin if long-established walls tremble as though in a fever. In a word, it was not a pleasant place. And Buławnik was not a pleasant roommate—he was an egoist and miser by day, and a master of sarcasm and vulgarity in the evening, while in the night he snored enough for ten men. But Baryka had no choice. He had to put up with this arrangement with his fellow student, since his own pockets were empty.

Immediately after moving in he took from his suitcase the tail coat and accessories that had been a gift in friendship from Hipolit Wielosławski, and decided to sell this relic, this symbol of life at Nawłóć—this memento. On the pretext of assessing the value of the outfit, Cezary gazed intently at the curious garment and, in secret from the coarse and insensitive Buławnik, shed a final tear. The coat still smelled of “Laura’s” perfume. Oh, how painful that scent was now! It was truly as if the devil were taking revenge with this faint, invisible, yet so powerful means of recalling former pleasures. Indistinctly, vaguely, as if in a dream, Baryka was beginning to understand that certain unimaginable scales were at that moment weighing the faded scent of Laura’s perfume against the same fragrance when it was smelled by Karolina as she stumbled all alone from tree to tree during the ball at Odolany. He, on the other hand, had had Laura in his arms at that time and had been borne along by the good fortune of demons...

Buławnik examined the tail coat with a shrewd and knowing eye; he checked the condition of the pants

The Coming Spring

and the shirt. He advised his "naive friend" to pass the suit on not to the neighborhood rag-and-bone man, from whom he would only get pennies for it, but to a certain tailor on the main street, who would pay a whole lot more. Cezary followed Buławnik's counsel. The tailor bought the suit, yet somehow the whole ensemble found its way into Buławnik's trunk. The latter explained to his naive friend that he had bought the thing from the tailor. All this had one positive upshot, in that when Buławnik was out, Cezary could smell his little Nawłoc tail coat from time to time. And he ate, drank, and paid his rent for quite some time on the basis of that transaction. But hard times came. The money ran out and it was necessary to pay for gas, electricity, and firewood. His credit with Buławnik was over, and he had lost the confidence of those in the little bread store. He had to go to Mr. Gajowiec, something he had been putting off all this time.

Aging Mr. Gajowiec was delighted to see him—thoroughly delighted!

In his office, where Cezary paid him the visit, it was hard to talk because people kept coming in and out to see him about various matters. As before, Mr. Gajowiec invited Baryka to his private apartment. One Sunday, when the young man appeared at the apartment the host was not at home. But the lady who owned the boarding house where the treasury official rented his place had been warned in advance and invited the suppliant in, explaining that the "deputy minister" would be a little late since he had numerous important visits to make that day.

Cezary entered and sat in the corner. He was already familiar with the large room opening onto a small garden in the courtyard. The bare black boughs of the trees cut diagonally across the great mirrored panes of the windows. The doorway to the adjoining room, or rather to a small bedroom, was hung with a curtain. The large drawing room was decorated with great care. It contained the tenant's own furniture—a mahogany suite—and a large carpet. There was an open bookcase with volumes in ornate bindings. On the walls were numerous portraits painted especially on commission by an accomplished artist. Previously Cezary had paid no attention to these images. Now, with nothing else to do other than peruse the titles of books on topics mostly foreign to him, such as economics or trade, he studied the portraits. They were shoulder-length pictures, composed all alike, but arranged in a photographic manner, which indicated that they had not been made from life. Beneath the portraits were inscriptions in Mr. Gajowiec's hand containing what were evidently the subjects' best-known quotations. The inscriptions read: Marian Bohusz, Stanisław Krzemiński, Edward Abramowski.¹ These names meant almost nothing to Cezary. Just some vague recollections...

When Mr. Gajowiec arrived home he asked his young friend for his impressions of his stay in the country. But his young friend told him little. In fact, virtually nothing. He wriggled out of it with stories about details and trivi-

¹ These were all political and social activists of the late 19th and early 20th century whom Żeromski had known personally and admired.

alities. In return, out of the blue Cezary asked Gajowiec about the people whose pictures hung in his apartment. In this way he hoped to delay explaining the principal purpose of his visit: his request for paid work. He had no idea how to approach this matter, for he was already in Gajowiec's debt, and here he had to incur new obligations of gratitude.

"Those figures? They're 'Varsovians' of times gone by: Marian Bohusz, Stanisław Krzemiński, Edward Abramowski."

"'Varsovians'? Why do you give them such a general, common name? Because they lived in Warsaw?"

"No, not for that reason. Here in Warsaw, under the Russian servitude we had certain outstanding characters—fine people and excellent scholars who lived in the crowd and who went unnoticed and unrecognized. Just like Greek slaves. These people were of the kind who can vanish in a throng, just melt away, but who infuse a whole generation with their selves. From those people we—that is, my generation—drew everything by which we still live today."

"I had no idea. Who were they? I must confess I've never even heard their names or read anything about them."

"The first one is Marian Bohusz. He was a naturalist who under different circumstances would have been a university lecturer, maybe even a distinguished professor. Here he became a columnist, translator and popularizer of certain philosophers and sociologists; for certain spheres he was a priceless figure. He broke himself down like loose change and mingled with the crowd. He

held an invisible professorship where he taught the multitude of the intelligentsia. When everything was closed to that multitude, when they could have grown degraded and barbarous, he gave them everything he considered most valuable from the West. While he himself lived under a double vault of servitude—that of Moscow and that of the *vlast' t'my*, the rule of darkness²—he forced his generation to think, to plumb the mood of society, to study and to be vigilant. Later on others, like Adam Mahrburg, did the job in a better, more systematic way. But he was the first. And he did it all with a glass of plain tea and a hunk of dry bread. Forever in worn shoes and tattered pants. A kind old teacher!...In the end he disappeared without a trace. Just faded away. He went blind. He was put in prison by the Muscovites and suffered mental torments. But he didn't want to cause trouble for people who had other things to worry about, didn't want to inconvenience anyone with his funeral—and so in his typical way, 'altruistically,' he vanished. He lived and died like a spirit."

"What about the one next to him?"

"The next one is Stanisław Krzemiński. He had been a member of the National Government³ in '63. He was a historian, essayist, bibliophile and in fact bibliomaniac, and above all an independent scholar. A real encyclopedist. He had a phenomenal memory. He had everything in his head. Anywhere else he would have been a famous

² The title of an 1886 play by Lev Tolstoy.

³ The leadership of the 1863–1864 January Uprising against the Russians.

and respected writer; he would have quietly labored and earned himself fame and memorials. In old Warsaw he was a journalist, a writer of political articles, an undetected smuggler across the border between old and new times. In secret, by clandestine methods, for people who revered him, he wrote about Poland: 'My Lady, my mighty Power, my sweetest Mother.' He believed unswervingly and against all reality in the future independence of his ragged, wretched nation, because he knew how strong it had been in the past, despite all its failings and weaknesses. All his life he passed on the certainty of his faith to those around him. Immersed in the *Acta Tomiciana*⁴ or in Konarski's educational reforms,⁵ at the same time he wrote about the most up-to-date tricks and pranks of contemporary diplomacy. He worked without a break, without respite, like the unsleeping chancellor of a non-existent country. A blessed Varsovian! In his modest apartment, amid the books and papers he loved, he worked till the very end on a great, old and new Poland—and he fell asleep forever at his post."

"And the third one?"

"The third one is Edward Abramowski. He was a philosopher and sociologist, an innovator and a pioneer in all kinds of areas. The main field of his intellectual work was psychology. He was a child of his times, a revolutionary socialist, bumping into all the obstacles of Marx's teaching, wandering among them with his yardstick of subjective phenomenism; in the end he created

⁴ Diplomatic documents from the early 16th century.

⁵ These reforms were enacted in the mid-18th century.

his own science of boycotting the state by means of bringing people together in federations, associations, and cooperatives. He attempted to create a new and previously unknown world which in his understanding would be a huge, universal ethical movement, a world that was predictable and contrived. This longed-for social and moral revolution under the Russian occupation led him logically to become a theorist of practical cooperatism. And his idea of organizing people against the state led him in practice, while Poland was ruled by the tsars, to consider non-existent Poland as the realization of his ideal.”

“In a word, it’s all, always, unchangingly—Poland, of Poland, for Poland, to Poland...”

“That’s right. Here in this country we were and are impaired in that respect. We’re born with the defect of Polishness.”

“I’m not talking about Poles being Poles, but rather the essential defect that arises when philosophical and sociological discussions end with a *deus ex machina*: Poland. There’s a well-known joke about elephants—that when a Pole has to follow the other nations in writing an essay about elephants, he immediately begins: ‘The Elephant and the Polish Question.’ But that’s not what I meant to say. I wanted to ask: why do these three men deserve particular recognition in your drawing room? Were there not other worthy people in those times?”

“Indeed there were! A great many of them! It’s hard for me to explain this mystery to you, my Azerbaijani friend. These three deserve special distinction in my room because they were my teachers. It was from them

that I learned a certain ideal out in my remote province—me, a little pen-pusher for the Russian government. It was thanks to them that I smuggled my soul into Poland. At that time Poles were denied any action, any activity, any realization of their visionary desires. Philosophy, dead and distant, theorizing sociology, literature, poetry—these took the place of acts and actions. Many a time a literary article had the swish of a sword-thrust or the lash of a whip.”

“I see! *Consolatio servitutis*...”⁶

“Exactly! Let me give you an example. Long, long ago, in 1891, for the first time since the January Uprising we were celebrating the Third of May Constitution.⁷ The anniversary was being observed openly, with a procession, or rather a public march—not by the whole of society, but by its radical fraction, journalists, students, young people. When the proclamation had gone out calling on people to mark the occasion, almost all the Warsaw papers—the so-called ‘serious’ press—published an unambiguous protest in a prominent place in their newspapers against such an overt commemoration of a national holiday. Of course, for profoundly political reasons. And so the university students responded to this protest with a slap in the face. All the ‘serious’ editors who had published the protest ‘had their ears boxed’ on the same day and at the same time. And on that day Marian Bohusz here wrote a brilliant article. It was brilliant because even the all-knowing censor didn’t

⁶ Consolation in servitude (Latin).

⁷ The Polish Constitution of 1791.

understand it, while everyone else did. In the article he told a story about a person who decides to take a trip all the way to America and puts an advertisement in the newspaper asking for a traveling companion. Late at night, in response to the advertisement a certain individual comes to see the traveler and announces loudly that he has no intention of going all the way to America; he advises him, the author of the announcement, not to travel, and even forbids him to go. That article was worth more than a battalion of heavy infantry. He turned ordinary people in the street, ordinary rascals and fools—into tourists planning to travel to America.”

“I understand. But that’s...”

“What is it? Tell me—I’m most curious!”

“It’s sort of...old-fashioned.”

“Oh no, my friend! It’s not old-fashioned! The reason I had those pictures made and put them up on my walls was so that I would constantly have before my eyes the border between the old-fashioned years and modern times. For me they are a border and a signpost to all that in these modern days it is wrong to be.”

“That I don’t follow at all.”

“See now, newcomer! Take Stanisław Krzemiński here: for him Poland was ‘My lady, my mighty Power, my sweetest Mother.’ With this profound sentiment, this most deep-felt faith, his role ended. My role is only just beginning at this point. His feeling, his faith and courage, now have to be channeled into work, into actions, into an understanding of actual relations and actual people, and—the most difficult thing—into a method for organizing life, relations, and real people.”

The Coming Spring

“Today’s Poland must be very different from the ideal of those columnists.”

“In any case it’s a lot more similar to their ideal than it was in their times.”

“Really? I don’t think so. Though of course I don’t know much about these things and I may be wrong. The one thing I’m not mistaken about is that then at least Poland didn’t oppress anyone or persecute them, or keep them locked up.”

“Back then, those same enemies of the regime were put in chains by Russia and by Germany and Austria! But that’s not what we’re talking about. See this Edward Abramowski: he taught us and we trusted him implicitly; thanks to his teachings we created many things and works of great value. We organized masses of people in splendid associations. We turned ignorant people into informed citizens. But the whole of his teaching was a daydream about society, a reverie about how to organize that society, a nominality, a *somnium vigilantis*.⁸ He loathed the state with its army and its wars, its courts and police, with all its state functions; and he urged people to organize themselves in voluntary unions. I look at his beloved portrait and repeat to him day after day: sleep in peace, bright spirit! We’re working day and night, without respite, to extend and realize your dreams, but very differently, entirely differently, in a free Polish state. When I gaze at that countenance, that spirit, I learn what not to do so as to reach the place he strove to

⁸ A waking dream (Latin).

reach, for life itself has contradicted the dreams of that social mystic a thousand times over.”

“That’s a fine way to go about it—realizing someone’s principles by negating them in action.”

“Listen! Abramowski taught that the state should be boycotted even in places where it’s working positively—so one should boycott schools, factory inspectors, state philanthropy, cultural and economic work—one should pull up or cut off the roots of the state, and sever the link between the needs of the people and government institutions. In place of the boycotted state institutions, or rather at the same time as they are being boycotted, free institutions should be developed: instead of state courts—courts of conciliation; instead of the police—defense associations; instead of state schools—free schools or private teaching, and so on. And finally, instead of a territorial society, an associative society. And now—the reality. The ‘defense association’ is the same police, if it’s to operate smoothly and effectively.”

“Not necessarily!”

“Things can’t be otherwise! Recently there was a ghastly attack, the so-called ‘Skolimów killings.’” Some bandits broke into the house of a miller in Skolimów and murdered his family; among them was a young lad who was engaged to the miller’s daughter. During the slaughter the girl threw her arms round her fiancé, begging him by all the names of love to defend her and help

⁹ This was a true story—the murders were committed on 4 February, 1922.

The Coming Spring

her; then, when she realized he was one of the assailants—she pleaded for mercy. But as she tried to embrace him lovingly and stay his arm he took an ax and cut off the girl's hands; then two days later, still undiscovered by the police, he attended his fiancée's funeral, bathed in tears and pitied by all who saw him. My friend, human villainy is such that courts of conciliation or defense associations aren't enough. And woe to all of us without education! Moreover, what would we have done without an army when the external enemy invaded our young state? Since the rest of the world had disowned us, were we supposed to wait with folded arms for new centuries of Muscovite bondage?"

"No doubt, no doubt. But so little is being done here to put an end to the bondage of the poor, the internal bondage."

"No doubt, no doubt. But this is only the beginning. If we could just be left alone for a few years! If various outside well-wishers would only let us be! The people you see in these pictures lived during the harshest winter. They looked at life from far away, from behind frozen bars. How could they give us accurate information about the lives of people slaving away in workshops and hovels? We ourselves don't even know yet what's what; we've only just felt the first breeze of spring on our faces. Our spring is only now coming. We're walking out onto the frozen soil and gazing at the distant fields. We're grasping hold of our own plough, our hoe and our rake, no doubt with clumsy hands. We need to work with stinking manure, to conquer the hard, overgrown fallow land."

“It looks like it’s going to be a long time before people here get to work.”

“We believe that our bright springtime will finally come...”

*

As he left to attend lectures or go to the dissecting room, and when he returned from classes or from town, Baryka had to pass through the neighborhood inhabited by the Jews. In fact, they were scattered throughout all the districts of Warsaw, but in this quarter they had settled en masse, creating an enclosed organism of several hundred thousand individuals. To begin with, the sight of the Jewish houses, apartment buildings, and stores sickened the newcomer with its particular vileness. Subsequently, however, it started to arouse his curiosity; and in the end it imposed itself upon him overpoweringly as a social issue. Cezary devoted his free moments to an exploration of the adjoining streets: Franciszkańska, Świętojerska, Gęsia, Miła, Nalewki and others.

The Jews who lived or worked in these parts formed what was known as the ghetto. But this settlement of theirs had not arisen long ago and had no history behind it. The very names of the streets indicated that this was so. No one had installed them here in separation, as had been done, for instance, by Pope Paul VI in Rome, so that they should have no contact with Christians; no one had forced them to reside here in particular and not elsewhere. They themselves gathered in this district, being joined by others, and increasing continually in number till

The Coming Spring

they created the ghetto of their own accord. In these streets there were no longer any Polish signs on stores, shops, or workshops. They were replaced by Jewish¹⁰ signs. No Poles were to be seen here. There were apartment buildings where the only Pole was the caretaker, and streets where the only Pole was the policeman.

These streets were most unappealing in appearance. The apartment buildings built by the Jews and belonging to them were marked by big-city shoddiness, brazen vulgarity, and disgraceful hideousness. The war had stripped them of their whitewash or oil paint. The paint on these buildings had curled into rolls and looked like slovenly side-locks on a slovenly Israelite. The inner parts of the buildings around the courtyards were not only stripped of oil paint or whitewash, but deprived of their plaster, which had crumbled off in flakes and lumps. The walls showed bare brickwork, though it too was slimy with filth and covered with cracks, stains, blotches, damp patches, and hideous dirt-marks that did not bother any of the inhabitants. How ghastly were the latrines, the trash heaps, the drains, sinks, gutters, and the very flagstones! The majority of courtyards were dark, partitioned, littered with crates, refuse, debris and junk, rags and tatters. Indescribable is the melancholy of these courtyards; deathly the sorrow of windows forever looking out onto stinking, loathsome alleyways, damp and moldering walls, and hallways and cellars exuding the smell of decay.

¹⁰ Meaning Yiddish.

At play on those blighted staircases, whenever a ray of sunshine would break through the wintry clouds and look down upon that vale of tears, were hordes of Jewish children—dirty, sickly, gaunt, pallid, sallow. When the wind howled and the frost bit, the children crowded into hovels where the grown-ups would jabber about business, profits, and quick ways to earn money. Once Cezary happened to see two children a few years old huddling together and wandering far away down Franciszkańska Street. Their sorry little feet squelched through the black, watery, clinging mud of the sidewalks and gutters; their clothes were filthy and soaked through. This pair was haggard beyond description. Their legs were thin as fire-irons, while their arms were as skinny as bird's leg-bones. Nor were their faces human, but looked like those of vultures or hawks; their eyes were the eyes of stern old men. This pair of wretches were waving their flimsy hands, nodding their heads on their scrawny necks and fiercely, passionately discussing something or other. What could the two of them have been talking about? Were they also speaking of profits and quick money-making? Cezary followed them for a long time as they bumped into walls and lamp-posts, till they reached a destination that was thoroughly unworthy of their efforts. He wept inwardly, in his secret heart of hearts, as he recalled his own happy, truly heavenly childhood...

On the days before the Sabbath he would sneak into the bazaars where they sold kosher supplies, fruit and vegetables, meat and dainties. There he observed a spectacle that was full of outlandish humor and at which one could not help but laugh, but which at the same time

The Coming Spring

was profoundly dismal. These places were dominated by raucous cries, almost roars, produced by trade in the strictly Jewish fashion. The sellers and purchasers of offal, pieces of goose, legs, heads, necks, beaks, and wings, and of herring, potatoes, scraps of oranges, candies, and fruit—all threw themselves on one another, snatched the goods from each other's hands, hurled abuse, and grabbed at money held in tightly clenched fists. Everyone had feathers in their hair and all were spattered and splashed with the blood of innocent ducks and roosters. Among the crowd wandered indescribable individuals of a kind unknown anywhere else on the globe, in rags so threadbare they seemed to be composed of an encrusted layer of grease; half-naked vendors roamed about, while half-naked beggars stood to the side of the human stream and inclined their heads in a repetitive gesture like the powerless stems of plants in the fields, entreating others for an offering in the name of God. The entire throng resembled a council of the damned possessed by the devil and arguing furiously in one another's face.

What was more amazing than anything in that neighborhood were the stores, tiny little places wedged into the first floors of apartment buildings. The streets and alleys were literally crammed with them. On the doors of these cramped establishments hung tin sign-plates with inscriptions in the Jewish tongue—and so the goods inside were intended only for a Jewish public. How paltry, how plain and scant were the offerings on those premises! The entire inventory of each one could not have been worth more than twenty zlotys. Some

scrap iron, skins, a few bundles or measures of victuals, some thread, shoelaces, or boot polish constituted the source of income of those who idled away their time in the low, narrow plankboard cells, freezing and dozing for days and evenings on end.

One time Baryka stumbled upon a large courtyard whose odious interior no pen could convey, and whose unparalleled disorder, filth, and revolting jumble of hastily abandoned objects could not be put into words. It was a storehouse for iron goods, or rather for old scrap metal. Here too there was a host of little stores selling old, shoddy, broken pieces of iron. It could be said that the entire courtyard had been eaten away by rust and that corrosion alone remained as a vestige of the things it had destroyed. And the Jews who ran about there, shouting and swarming and shuffling about, were also rusty and devoured by iron.

At a certain moment a cart rumbled into the courtyard bearing some immense load under a tarpaulin. Many hands worked together to unload the cart; the tarpaulin was cast aside in the frozen mud. The delivery consisted of a mass of objects affected by rust: cut-up lengths of piping, fire-blackened griddles, screws, hooks, pieces of poker, halves of tongs, nuts, crooked nails, bases for utensils of unclear purpose, spikes and zigzags from garden railings, keys, heaters from flat-irons, stove lids, fragments of window fittings, door handles without a bolt, and countless masses of scrap-iron of every possible kind. When what was under the tarpaulin was brought to light, there emerged as if from nowhere a multitude of Jewish men and women, mostly old,

The Coming Spring

crooked, bow-legged, raw-skinned individuals with matted hair. This entire swarm began shouting, arguing, and reaching for particular pieces and fragments of iron so as to acquire them amid an indescribably quarrelsome bargaining. It was difficult to figure out what kind of people these were. Merchants? Dealers? Go-betweens? Collectors?

Cezary had the impression that this was an assemblage of old wastrels, specialists in accumulating old pokers. He could neither find within himself a respect for their poverty, nor understand the sense of their occupation. In search of great earnings they had evidently come down in the world, and now they were searching for an entirely insignificant profit while still dreaming of a great one. Like the others in their tiny stores, their lairs and dens, they were on the lookout for big returns while achieving literally nothing. What kind of social reform could possibly raise them to a higher social level? What could be done for these people to make them equal with others in rights, in the possession of the goods of this world, in work, mores, way of life?

There was an excess here of ragged beggars and paupers who expended the natural vigor of the Jewish race on cheating one another, on strenuous arguments over scraps of food and herring and offcuts of meat, and who did nothing, literally nothing to earn a good, fair, stable living in the factories or shops. Of course, many of them slaved away in these streets as porters, cart drivers, hired hands, or shop assistants; and these folk even looked different on the outside, normal, human. But the average type was a caricature of a human figure.

The Wind from the East

Hunched, crooked, with unkempt hair and beard, slovenly, infinitely ridiculous in their low caps and filthy, ground-length gaberdines, they roamed the streets in throngs, pushing their way around, going in and out, chattering, squabbling, and in fact doing nothing at all. Cezary arrived at the generalization that the Jews who inhabited the neighborhood he had found himself in were an assemblage of restless, talkative idlers.

*

Aside from official business, which took up a huge part of his time, and independently of it, Mr. Szymon Gajowiec had his own work in the evenings. He was writing a book about the new Poland, a Poland free of invaders, but equally free of Romantics, mystics, bards, prophets, socialist or reactionary paper dictators, and every kind of windbag. He intended to portray the real Poland, “made up of three unequal halves,” as the good windbags had once written—a Poland living from the labor of blackened hands and a dissipated Poland, one overburdened with a huge population of Jews and with hostile neighbors—a Poland with unresolved agricultural issues and saddled with foreign laws to establish guilt and punishment, and with a bizarre foreign currency¹¹—a country ruined by its invaders, looted of its physical and spiritual resources, filled with ignorance and indo-

¹¹ Since Poland regained its independence in 1918, its currency had been the “Polish mark” inherited from Germany. The present currency, the zloty, was introduced in April 1924.

The Coming Spring

lence, filth, barbarity and boorishness. It was this image of reality, of the essence of things, based on the most ruthless realism, that he sought to inspire with the spirit of the prophets and apostles who during the years of servitude had refused to allow the wretched creature known as the Polish nation to fall asleep forever. Mr. Gajowiec drew the materials for his titanic work not only from published sources that were familiar and accessible, from statistics and registers compiled by the governments of the occupying powers, but also from new sources, unknown to anyone, that had been gathered by the new Polish ministries. He was unable to keep track of this huge mass of facts, observations, and conclusions. To maintain control of all this information about countries that had now united and grown together into one body, and to reckon up all the details so as to issue a final opinion, was too much for the strength of one person. So Mr. Gajowiec solicited the assistance of Cezary Baryka.

This intelligent and hard-working young man, who happened to be so dear to him, proved an immense help in his endeavor. Mr. Gajowiec did not wish to "defraud" the treasury and carry out his research using the labor of those who worked for him. And so he paid Baryka a wage from his own monthly salary. As he put it, he had committed a sufficiently large abuse in acquiring for his own purposes the information he had drawn from official registers, statistics, and forms.

Gajowiec's book was to be crammed with facts, packed tight like a projectile. Who was he intending to shoot at; who was to be struck by this work, who was to

be unseated, and who defended and lifted up? He said he was writing an open letter to his fellow citizens. He believed they would have to read the letter and hear what it had to say, since it would contain the truth about their own strength, which they themselves did not know.

Cezary had found a rather profitable occupation, and so he worked with great zeal. Thanks to Gajowiec's literary passion he could earn a living, and for some time his livelihood in Warsaw was secure. In the mornings and afternoons he worked in the dissecting room, attended lectures, then took dinner with friends; and in the evenings, in Gajowiec's "drawing room" he shuffled papers, counted, added up, took notes, and prepared summaries from the piles of papers that the "deputy minister" brought home. This occupation had one drawback—too much time spent in the company of an elderly gentleman. The elderly gentleman, like almost all elderly gentlemen, liked to recollect all sorts of things from his life and the lives of others, and to tell stories—in a word, to prate. What for Baryka was old-fashioned, the past, ancient history, since it had taken place before he was born, for Gajowiec was fresh as could be, hot off the press, and generally new—the older it was, the newer it was, for he remembered it better, with a clearer mind. From those times he knew all the most eminent people who now were in the government. He could describe almost every one of them from that unknown, secret, hidden, olden, remote side. It often happened that a person who to Baryka had seemed a common simpleton or garden-variety bourgeois, in Gajowiec's account took on an entirely different hue, which that person had ac-

The Coming Spring

quired precisely from his courageous and exceptional behavior back in those dusty old days of the past, “in the times of servitude.” And it also often happened that a personage whom the young medic found likeable, engaging, and interesting, brought a sarcastic smile or even a sneer to Gajowiec’s lips, for in those dusty old times this present-day braggart and fine talker had been a no one or a petty scoundrel sneaking by between knout and good old Polish snobbery. Cezary could never get it right.

Mr. Szymon Gajowiec—who strove with all his might to portray the very essence of Poland as it lived, breathed, suffered, and rejoiced, in its realest reality—was nevertheless also a mystic. He believed in miracles. He believed that this country was under a mysterious protection. In conversation with Cezary he pointed to several “miracles.” Mr. Gajowiec’s first “miracle” was, of course, the rebirth of the Polish state. The second was the driving back of the Bolsheviks in 1920.

The arguments for this “miracle” were as follows: The Bolsheviks had a huge army with excellent cavalry. Almost all of the Polish lands had been overrun by that army. The Bolshevik standards bore a motto calling for the liberation of the proletariat from bourgeois oppression—for social revolution. Who and what could possibly have resisted such an army and its moral power? In Poland it ought to have found advocates; it ought to have crushed the meager Polish armed forces, for in the rear of the Polish army there should have arisen a second force—the revolutionized masses of the proletariat from town and country. This second force ought to have

lent a hand to the Red Army. Yet in fact the Bolshevik Red Army was sent summarily packing, and fled Poland like a band of raiders. This was an essential, undeniable miracle on the Vistula.¹²

Another piece of evidence indicating the mysterious guardianship of Poland were the stories of certain people whom Mr. Gajowiec called “great Polish characters.”

“Someone,” he would say, “inspires greatness of soul in a lad from the provinces,¹³ an impoverished medical student who never gets enough sleep or enough to eat and lives from hand to mouth—inspires him to take up a struggle no more nor less than with the entire tsardom of Moscow, with the empire of Alexander the Third,¹⁴ which all the thinkers in the country have declared to be a power that cannot not be defeated by anyone on the planet. This student of medicine, who barely has enough money to buy ink, pen, and paper, writes repeated appeals to the workers and the peasants, calling on them to organize and to fight against the omnipotent tsarist system. With the aid of fellow conspirators he copies these revolutionary documents on a secret printing press, while he serves as the typesetter by light of a candle stub—then later, he takes several hundred copies of what he himself has printed and carries them on his

¹² The Battle of Warsaw of 1920 is in fact commonly known as “the Miracle on the Vistula.”

¹³ The following description combines elements from the early lives of two leading political figures: Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935), first president of the new Polish state, and Stanisław Wojciechowski (1869–1953), from 1922 its second president.

¹⁴ Tsar of Russia from 1881 to 1894.

back into Poland. In order to cross the tightly controlled border, he has to ford the boundary river at night. He chooses the darkest, deepest, rainiest autumn night, when the Russian border guard will wrap himself in his warm coat and doze off on his horse. Then this activist removes his shoes and strips to the waist. Under his left arm he takes a rod which in the darkness he'll use to feel for any border guard standing at the riverbank. In his right hand he grips a revolver to shoot at the fellow if the rod should touch him and a struggle ensue. Hearing a splash in the river, the soldier cries from the saddle: "*Ya tebya vizhu! Ya tebya vizhu!*"—I can see you! I can see you! From the cry the revolutionary knows where the soldier is. He passes by him, no more than a couple of paces away. He can hear the saddle creak beneath the rider, and the rattle of his spurs, and the horse's nervous snort. He walks barefoot, frozen to the marrow, shivering, half-naked, treading on sharp thorns amid the bushes—in his native country, so as to wake it from its sleep of bondage."

Mr. Gajowiec told his young listener about the six successive workers' demonstrations in which he had taken part year after year on May 1. Yet with true delight he recalled the first of these demonstrations, organized by that very crosser of boundary rivers. Then too, as always, the same activist had written an appeal calling to people to commemorate May 1 on Ujazowskie Avenue in Warsaw right outside the walls of the Belweder, the residence of the governor-general of Warsaw—the ruler of Poland on behalf of the tsar. He himself had printed the appeal on red paper and he himself had distributed

it in the Warsaw factories. Disguised as an Englishman who had found himself by chance in this city and was strolling along the Avenue, in a tall, carefully brushed top hat (which was strikingly redolent of the Wałowa Street flea market), with a sky-blue pince-nez and a long overcoat, the organizer sauntered haughtily and indifferently among the groups of demonstrators who on that day, for the first time had walked out of their factories and shops en masse to go and stand face to face with the might of tsardom. Mounted gendarmes on magnificent horses rode right up to them, while the officers strode onto the sidewalk to take a closer look at the face of the accidental Englishman. Swarms of police and army surrounded the demonstrators on all sides, directing them toward the open gate of the Gardens¹⁵ so as to drive them in there and hold them captive. Mr. Gajowiec recalled the pallid faces of these people, these first warriors for the cause of independence, marching in front of the Belweder.

“Strange, mighty strange is the power of prayer,” Mr. Gajowiec would say.

And he would recall a certain prayer of his at an image streaked with rain and damaged by foul weather, at a Uniate wayside chapel on the road to Drohiczyn. At that time he was standing beside Cezary’s mother, the ever so young Miss Jadwiga...He had prayed fervently for succor for the poor of Podlasie. And behold—the great powers were no more, emperors had fallen, whole ar-

¹⁵ The Łazienki Gardens are located next to the Belweder, which today serves as the presidential palace.

The Coming Spring

mies had disappeared, and impregnable fortresses had crumbled into dust. The prayer had worked...

Mr. Gajowiec, by-the-book civil servant, confessed many effusions of this kind to his young assistant.

*

The assistant who listened in silence to these half-real, half-mystical Polish stories paid little attention to them. In his ears they sounded like tiny silver bells that kept repeating the same name over and again. And so as he conversed he did not converse, and as he listened he did not hear. Beneath the cloak of conversation, dispute, even argument, all through his thinking, his reflections, even his calculations, there ran like a murmuring brook the everlasting memory of beautiful Mrs. Laura. And her perpetual absence, the boundless steppe of separation, the barren and arid Sahara of life without her—galled and infuriated him. He did not like it here in the city. He had nothing here that was great, monumental, that he could hang his emotions on. He understood Gajowiec's labors, rigorous and unheeding of anything else, digging like a plough into the future of this country. But he could not get excited by the cold, pedantic, unadorned prose. Gajowiec dreamed of one thing as if it were his goal in life and his good fortune—of having a Polish currency. When he pronounced the word "złoty" he beamed, he glowed, he was radiant. He explained at length to his young companion what hardships, struggles, toils—what vast knowledge, anticipations, and reasonings—what familiarity with the arcana and tergiversa-

tions of the new life, which could not be foreseen by any sociology, any program or by any internationale—and above all, what creative genius was required by this “złoty.” Cezary concurred with him, but he did not burn with enthusiasm for the złoty. If Mr. Gajowiec had known what this young man was thinking about during his intricate disquisitions, he would have kept his lips sealed tight.

In time, the more Baryka immersed himself in life, the more people he met and the more facts he observed, the greater aversion he felt toward the whole collectivity of Poland. Everyone irritated him with their attachment to the past, to this sorry “yesterday”—and their joyfulness and naive delight in the splendid “today.” Whereas Cezary saw this “today” not in the many-colored coat of freedom, but in the repulsive rags and tatters of real, glaring facts. What could he possibly care that this particular hole in the rags was an unavoidable consequence and natural result of such and such causes—that this ulcer or wound or dried scab was the work and the fault of the partitioning powers, for which they were held responsible. Baryka saw only the holes, the patches, the rags, the ulcers and the wounds. Furthermore—he saw the contusions and bruises inflicted by the new authorities, who were striving to be stronger, not weaker, than those of the partitioning powers. Even places that seemed healthy and flourishing he began to suspect of inner lues. He poked these places with the probe of his mistrust or sliced into them fearlessly with his lancet. After all, he had seen life in the village belonging to the manor. Shouldn’t that whole Nawłóć with all its

The Coming Spring

Chłodeks just be sent up in smoke? And that Leniec with its Mr. Barwicki and its Mrs. Barwicka?...Here there appeared another level of experiencing reality. The hand seized not a lancet, but an eastern device for dealing with one's problems...

*

At this time, the room shared by Buławnik and Baryka received frequent visits from their friend Antoni Lulek. Lulek was a law student in one of the senior classes. He was a sickly, fragile, diminutive blond fellow. Because of his poor health he had not taken part in the Bolshevik war. Lulek was exceptionally well-read and was an excellent debater. Had it not been for his anemia and his asthma, which sometimes "silenced" him, he could have out-talked a dozen of the busiest mouths. There were times too when he just "stopped talking," that is, he said nothing whatsoever, not a word. At such moments, with his head, or rather his chin, propped on a skinny, bony fist, he would sit staring at his adversary with his piercing blue eyes (in student rooms, it is always "adversaries" that gather to drink cold tea, smoke cigarettes and talk). Lulek was older and had seen his share of life. During the Great War he had wasted away in various prisons in the Russian and German partitions. The "joint" had taken up a considerable portion of his life. In the joint, or rather in various joints, Lulek had had time on his hands and had learned foreign languages, and knowing English (rather poorly) and French and German (entirely well), he was always translating

something or other. He was "engaged in academic work," as those in his circle of friends described it. But no one had ever actually set eyes on these academic labors. Something was always about to be published by certain ideological collectives and circles, but things never came to fruition, naturally for lack of money, which in this milieu bore no other name but to the point of tedium was referred to as "dough."

Lulek liked talking with Baryka and did not like talking with Buławnik. Buławnik was bright (sometimes a little too bright), rational in his straightforwardness, and could not tolerate the fog and mystery in which Lulek liked to envelope himself. If Buławnik proved his point too categorically, too "clinically," Lulek would sail out onto the expansive waters of provisos and scientific bases, embarking on argumentation that was hard to keep up with, and covering up his traces. Nevertheless, from time to time Lulek had need of material assistance in the form of short-term credit, and at such moments he would appear in Buławnik's den. The latter was well-disposed to this particular client. He looked after his money, or rather his father's, irreproachably, but it never happened that he refused Lulek a "loan," which, let us be honest, could easily have ended up being a "donation." Yet Lulek was extraordinarily punctual. He gave back loans at the assigned time. It fell out that Lulek talked with Baryka about abstract, academic, theoretical and mysterious matters, and with Buławnik he spoke about money. When Buławnik butted into the conversation and started to dispute, acting wise and presenting arguments, Lulek would make one or two short retorts,

then would grow subdued and finally fall completely quiet, descending into the asthma that silenced him. "Scrutinizing" his adversary's reasoning with his cold eyes, he would remain motionless for a long time. For Buławnik, Lulek's soundless laughter was a hundred times worse than his spoken expostulations.

And what did Lulek discuss with Baryka? Mostly the latter's experiences in Baku and Moscow. Lulek had never been to Russia; he had never seen Moscow, or Tula or anywhere of the sort; yet he was as well-informed about Russian matters as if he had spent his entire life there. It was all from books, journals, and magazines. His phenomenal memory enabled him to have at his fingertips citations from all the edicts of all the most bizarrely titled Bolshevik authorities; dates, figures, the precise wording of decrees and statutes, the exact formulas used in the speeches of the leaders and the exact texts of the opposition's rebuttals. Lulek's knowledge was located within the boundaries established by these particular doctrines and framed by these particular laws and elucidations.

On top of this, Lulek was no mean "psychologist." He oriented himself easily amid the mass of facts the younger man produced, and was able to sense the nature of what moved Baryka and the true power of his doubts and disillusionments.

It was in those very locations, those painful places, that at just the right moment he was able to give a long dagger-thrust of mockery and biting sarcasm. Baryka was charmed by Lulek and, slowly and imperceptibly, he fell under his mental control.

There came a time when Cezary made certain confessions to this "psychologist" concerning Nawłóć and Leniec. Of course he didn't tell him everything, but alluded to this and that. Lulek listened most attentively, propping his hairless chin on a hairless hand. He offered nothing in the way of advice or commentary, but it was plain that he attached a certain significance to the younger man's half-confession. Baryka felt a profound need to unburden himself. How he longed to tell everything, everything! To cast from his heart the rocks that oppressed it; to perform the confession that Father Anastazy had once offered him! But he couldn't get into romantic business of that sort with Lulek, since the latter was after something altogether different in these matters. His goal was to embitter Baryka, to bring him to a state of repugnance and—why mince words!—to a state of vengefulness. To this end Lulek made use of certain short cuts. When he spoke of the gentry, that idle and obsolete class, he never called them "the gentry" or "the bourgeoisie" but always: "the Nawłóć." He referred to the depravation, villainy, and mental corruption of the women of the landowning spheres as "Lauras" and "Laurettes." Fat, mindless lords of the manor he called "Barwickis." This method to some extent matched Cezary's feelings, and somehow suited him well. He himself occasionally used the same expressions in conversation—despite the fact that afterwards he trembled and felt a burning anger that by doing so he was exposing himself to being talked about.

But Lulek knew how to control these transitory reflexes. He laid before his friend's eyes as-yet unseen

images of the poverty of the common people, and stabbed him right in the heart with them. He stirred within him all he had seen long ago and more recently; he roasted him with red-hot irons in the great fire that was the sufferings of the proletariat and the poor. He prevented him from returning to the well-trodden, comfortable pathways of his feelings, but instead drove him on to new roads. Had Lulek himself experienced the sufferings of the oppressed? Heaven alone knew! He spoke of those sufferings in hackneyed formulae, always in the same concise way, using unchanging epithets, which were tedious and barren to the point of revulsion, and yet which contained the truth of plain things.

He pronounced the noun “proletariat” with a certain syllabic shortening, as if by being frequently turned in his mouth and having its linguistic corners sucked it had become smooth, round, and soft. The word “revolution” he uttered with a kind of hiss and a whistle that the palatal “sh” sound seemed to produce. Lulek lavished especial antipathy, hatred, revulsion, contempt, and scorn on the local socialist organization with nationalist leanings.¹⁶ Whenever he spoke of the people and operations of that association and its circles, his nose took on a light green hue and his eyes filmed over. He regarded the other parties—the “bourgeois” and nationalist parties, the peasant parties, the progressive and Catholic and non-denominational groupings—with greater tol-

¹⁶ The PPS (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna) or Polish Socialist Party.

eration, simply because in his soul hatred grew in inverse proportion to ideological differences—the smaller the differences, the greater the hatred. In response to all the pronouncements of these parties and the utterances of their “leading lights” Lulek offered no assertions or rebuttals of his own. He merely scrutinized their propositions and arguments just as he had scrutinized Buławnik’s ideas. After all, he was in possession of the truth; so why should he ruin his health on altercations about one or another kind of nationalism.

In reality, however, this sickly man did ruin his health by nurturing absolute hostility and vengefulness toward the newly arisen Polish Republic. Every failure, slip, defeat, or elemental misfortune of the Polish state and the Polish government as a whole, as a political and social being, brought a smile of delight to Lulek’s heart. He was waiting sincerely and intently for the death of this formation, which he always called “the most reactionary canker of humankind.” The things he learned from Baryka, for example about Gajowiec’s project, stirred in his soul a mortal affliction, a profound torment, a mental asthma that undermined his physical wellbeing more than the sickness itself. This could obscure his ideal, and in practice postpone the inevitable demise of Poland. And Lulek was prepared to sacrifice his paltry health and his sorry life to hasten that demise. With trembling hands he would seize the morning newspapers in the hope of reading “good news”—some public calamity, profound, large-scale failure, or embarrassment in the eyes of other countries, some threat, some forecast of destruction tossed out by an English potentate or a

The Coming Spring

German ex-general. His most secret and fervent sigh, a kind of prayer, was the watchword:

“All I need is to hold out till this ‘independence’ comes to a speedy end—then I’ll be able to breathe a lot more easily!”

It must be acknowledged that these feelings did not involve any material impulse being passed from hand to hand by a “neighboring power.”¹⁷ Lulek was an ideologist of the first water. He lived in entirely genuine poverty and was prepared to waste away and die “inside” for his passions, his sympathies, and his hatreds. But no one arrested him. His suffering intensified when he heard or read about slow but permanent reforms, improvements, repairs, and the introduction of small changes for the better. He regarded these as crimes greater than bare-faced lurches into reactionism. These improvers and moderate menders and cautious cunctators he loathed with every fiber of his being. He called it all “Gajowianism,” and in it he included the red and pink parties in their entirety. On the other hand, he was brimming with enthusiasm for the reforms of the “neighboring power.” When he read about severe sentences for counter-revolutionaries, about the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of people, about extrajudicial killings and the massacre of hostages, he went pale with delight. At such times his hands trembled and his face glowed as if from profound inspiration. His dry cough sounded like a constant approbation. Lulek not only felt himself to be, but

¹⁷ In other words, Lulek was not in the pay of the Soviets.

also acted in spirit as if he were, *in partibus infidelium*.¹⁸ Since he especially disliked the Polish army, he was prepared to destroy the country for its “militarism” alone. But as he could do nothing to prevent fresh manifestations of the success of this “militarism” in the form of the Polish army repelling the Bolshevik invasion, he was “obliged” to seek help beyond the borders of the country. Lulek was constantly producing secret articles, veritable calumnious reports, for foreign publications with views similar to his own way of thinking. It gratified him in a certain way to know that he was not the only one blackening the character of sinful Poland before the Areopagus¹⁹ of Europe.

He told Cezary that he knew a poet who received a permanent monthly salary—of eight dollars—from the editors of a certain radical publication for supplying that organ, which was printed in the Polish language, with nothing but rhymed lampoons ridiculing the head of the Polish reactionaries, Ignacy Paderewski.²⁰ In Lulek’s view, Poland’s wretched position in the military sphere was fully matched in the domains of education and justice, and above all in the prison system and the tortures applied therein. However, Lulek had no words of censure for the arsonists imprisoned for setting fire to a powder magazine and blowing up not just these defensive instal-

¹⁸ In the lands of unbelievers.

¹⁹ Tribunal, from the location of the supreme court in Athens.

²⁰ Ignacy Paderewski (1860–1941), a renowned pianist and composer, was also involved in right-wing politics and in the post-war period served as Prime Minister (1919) and as Polish ambassador to the League of Nations (1919–1922).

The Coming Spring

lations of Polish “militarism” but also the adjoining buildings and neighborhoods, along with women, children, and the infirm²¹; nor did he castigate those who supported, assisted, and trained them. In his vocabulary all these people bore the name of “ideological opponents of the bourgeois government in Poland.” In his view the Polish government had no right to defend itself against its ideological opponents or to respond to the attack by subduing and punishing them, but ought rather to lay down its arms at their feet and withdraw in general from the “seat of tyranny” it had illegally occupied. This seat ought to pass directly into the hands of the ideological opponents of the Polish government. It goes without saying that Lulek did not support the Polish side in the struggle against the Bolshevik forces.

And here there was a disagreement between Lulek and Baryka. Cezary had not been on the side of the Bolshevik forces that had once overrun half of Poland. Both in actuality and ideologically he had supported Poland. He had had a great many moving and memorable wartime experiences that no one could take away from him nor anything make him forget. Lulek realized in their conversations that this matter was not even to be mentioned—that at least for the moment, there was no likelihood of extirpating these “chivalrous” emotions

²¹ On October 13, 1923 a powder magazine in the Warsaw Citadel exploded, killing 28 people, including women and children, and injuring many others. The cause of the explosion was never clarified, though it may have been caused by negligence on the part of one of the workers. The authorities, however, blamed communist terrorists, and used the incident to clamp down brutally on communist activists.

from his student's memory. And so he avoided such subject matter. He merely battled in general against barbaric nationalism and the over-embellishment of the acts of certain historical figures—what he described as that chronic, debilitating, peculiarly Polish malaria of the soul that was historicism, resting above all on the production and dissemination by means of art of the alleged and supposed accomplishments of Polish militarism.

Antoni Lulek's principles were neither unfamiliar nor alien to Cezary Baryka. In the eventful and blustering Baku period of his short life, in his so-called "youth," which is a "Sculptor" who shapes "entire lives,"²² he had encountered such principles frequently. He had lived them not only mentally and emotionally, but also as it were physically, in the herd, with friends, socially, out of snobbery. In his world these principles had been fashionable. Which of his circle of pals in Baku would ever have admitted to feeling any kind of patriotism toward Russia, toward the pre-war tsarist regime? He would have been a black-hundredist,²³ a hooligan, a careerist, a ruffian and a thug.

At that time Cezary had felt no Polish patriotism. For him these had been the mawkish sentiments of his reactionary Catholic mother, whose whimpering nostalgia was caused as much by her rheumatism as by her long-

²² A reference to a poem by Romantic poet Count Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–1859).

²³ The Black Hundred was a pro-tsarist, reactionary, anti-Semitic organization in Russia in the early 20th century.

The Coming Spring

ing for Poland. At that time Poland had in fact been for him his mother's rheumatism, her arthritis, her sclerosis and her cough. But after he arrived in Poland something had grown in his soul. The ideals of Bolshevism were no longer pure and no longer adequate for him. While Lulek theorized, Cezary perceived these ideals in manifest form; he saw them anew, understood them and grasped their worth. But something prevented him strongly from feeling them as he had before.

When Lulek attempted to demean the idea of the cult of nationality by demonstrating on the basis of numerous examples that national struggles do not lead to any end but quite the opposite, create an ever greater gulf between nations, and an ever greater oppression of certain nations by other nations—and always of the weaker by the more powerful—and that the only border an intelligent person can acknowledge is the border that runs across the whole world separating the English, French, German, Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian workers from the bourgeoisie of England, France, Germany and so on—at such times Cezary felt there was “something rotten” in this matter. He sensed that Lulek said these things not because he was extremely clever and knew his Marx, but rather because he was in some sense narrow-minded and even somewhat obtuse. He understood that it was easy for Lulek to be so radical, and it was easy for him to discard the Polish border because he had never seen it in person—the border markers that poor, distressed people were kissing through their tears. And in general it was easy for him to discard many mental notions and experiences which clearly comprised this very border.

The border markers had been formed above all by the past. And not a militaristic past but precisely a peaceful, humble, innocent one, a past containing a multitude of quiet labors in the realm of subtle things. Cezary had acquired his conception of this past from his anti-Bolshevik marches across and along the frontiers of Poland, where he had seen libraries plundered, works of art destroyed, stained-glass windows smashed, and shards, fragments, books and papers scattered to the four winds. He had acquired this conception from his conversations with Gajowiec. When Gajowiec spoke of such things, Cezary had bridled and protested. But when Lulek refused to listen, failing to appreciate any of it and showing no interest—it all crawled out of the ground and revealed the imperfections, the defects, and often the absurdly simplistic nature of Lulek's position. When, amid coughing fits, Lulek would furiously assert that the word "patriotism" was utilized these days only in order to arouse the most ignorant instincts of the most ignorant masses, since those who employ the word, this alleged ideal, use it merely to conceal their own material interests, wielding this cliché to anaesthetize the masses, to put them to sleep, to overcome their vigilance, and to keep wealth and power in their own hands—at such times Cezary sensed that there was something rotten with Lulek too. And there was a little something in addition. Cezary couldn't put his finger on it, but it was there.

Another stumbling block was the question of the Jews of Franciszkańska, Świętojerska, Miła, and also Nalewki. Economic growth required that the bourgeois-

sie step down, since they were an obsolete class. If they were not prepared to do so voluntarily, they had to be removed by violence, forcibly, by means of revolution. The workers would assume complete power. What would happen then to the poorest of all proletariats, the Jewish poor of Franciszkańska Street and environs? Were they workers? Were they bourgeois? Cezary worried in his mind, on the basis of all he had seen of revolutionary matters with his own eyes in the course of his life, that this Jewish bourgeoisie, and at the same time this Jewish ghetto—these people with no past or future, of whom there were more than three million in Poland—these pretendants who could claim that they in fact were the world of the workers and the proletariat—that they might take into their own hands absolute power over the ruins. For he did not think that such a turn of events would serve the cause of progress in the world.

*

One morning Lulek came, or rather ran, into Cezary's room out of breath and in a state of considerable animation. But it was not possible to speak freely, because Buławnik was sitting there with no intention of budging, since he was furiously studying something or other, shuffling various human bones. Lulek gave ever more impatient coughs. Eventually Cezary thought up a way of getting Buławnik out of the room—he produced a certain sum of money and sent the other man out to buy smoked sausage, rolls, sugar and tobacco.

The moment Buławnik had slammed the door shut, making the windows rattle in the entire building, Lulek burst out:

“Hey, listen!”

Before Baryka could listen to anything as promised, he had first to acquaint himself with a series of high and low coughs. Once they had somewhat subsided, Lulek said:

“I’m doing this for you and you alone, to educate you, if only just a little...”

“You’re really too kind, my good sir.”

“So you can have some education on the side. You can think whatever you like about what I’m about to tell you. Now you have an opportunity to hear the truth...”

“The introduction I’ve already heard. Now perhaps we could move on to chapter one...”

“Well, then...Listen up!”

Lulek leaned in and spoke in the quietest whisper. The whisper was indeed considerably quieter than the wheezing, hacking, and bubbling of the bacillary elements in his chest:

“Tomorrow morning there’s going to be a conference here in Warsaw.”

“Who’s running it?”

“It’s a party conference; or rather, an organizational and informational one.”

“So?”

“I want to do you a favor and bring you to the conference. You’ll finally get to hear some real people in this country.”

"I'll get to hear real people...Is this the CKR²⁴ or something?"

"What are you on about! I'm not going to take some ex-soldier to a CKR meeting—if such a thing existed!...Like I said—it's an organizational and informational conference."

"'Organizational and informational'—now there's a *contradictio in adiecto*.²⁵ Either it's organizational or it's informational."

"It's exactly what I'm telling you. There'll be people from the organization and there'll be people like you who need to be educated and taken in hand."

"No one's going to take me in hand—I'm not an umbrella or a spoon."

"Well, actually your mind does need taking under control. Just as the leadership of the party is the brain of the working class, in the same way minds like yours—vacillating and full of left-over bourgeois notions—have to be directed and guided by a central mind, the mother-idea."

"Fine, I'll go to this shindig of yours."

"I'll give you shindig, you Nawłóć Romeo!"

"I don't mind listening to whatever nonsense you spout one after another in your hackneyed clichés, without any intellectual oversight. The brain of the working class! I love it!"

²⁴ Centralny Komitet Robotniczy (Central Workers' Committee), the main authority of the PPS or socialist party, not the communist party.

²⁵ Contradiction in terms.

"There's one condition: discretion. Not a word to anyone—be sure now—it's in your own best interest."

"In my own best interest'—now that sounds like a threat. You know, Lulek, you can be really histrionic at times. So where's all this happening? Is it far away? It's probably somewhere at the very end of the longest tram line, right? Do I need to wear black—pants and tail coat—and a handkerchief? With my cuffs turned inside out in the direction of the CKR?"

Lulek coughed ferociously. When he was through he wheezed:

"I'll pick you up at ten in the morning."

"Am I going to be blindfolded?"

"No, but you'll have your tongue tied in a knot so you won't go blabbing to your wonderful Gajowieces. Are you with me?"

"All right. I get it. I'll be at home tomorrow. Ten o'clock, then?"

"Ten o'clock," whispered Lulek, looking at Cezary with imploring, sorrowful eyes—the cold eyes of a fanatic.

*

At ten o'clock the next morning the two of them left the Jewish quarter and turned toward a busier and cleaner part of the city. Lulek cast frequent cautious glances over his shoulder. On the pretext of lighting a cigarette, he would stand for a moment and glance down the street with a look of such wariness it was hilarious to see. As if out of spite, no one was tailing him. If anyone was insis-

The Coming Spring

tently following him it was old Jewish ladies with baskets of apples or lemons on their arm. At a certain moment, as they were passing a city square Lulek flagged down a dorozhka. Cezary burst into harsh laughter:

“Lulek in a dorozhka! For that alone you ought to be arrested and led to the guillotine! You bourgeois!”

“Just get in!” yelled the law student, looking round in every direction.

Cezary did so, the faster and more willingly because sleet was lashing down mercilessly. They set off. Cezary looked askance at the skinny, frail, yellowish figure of the revolutionary, at his hollow, black-ringed eyes, his straggling moustache, twirled by nervous fingers and stained from the smoke of cheap cigarettes—that unnecessary nasturtium-colored moustache beneath a blueish nose. He felt sorry for Antoni Lulek! To waste away like that for humanity! To forgo bourgeois comforts as he did, for the future golden age of history!

After all, this starveling could be playing cards, frequenting houses of ill repute, carousing in pubs and making money on the stock exchange. Whereas in fact he denied himself everything in the interests of his insatiable obsession with redeeming the poor from servitude. But Cezary was comforted by the thought that Lulek would come to life one day—if he lived that long—when the class struggle came to an end, when there would only be one class on the planet, when everyone had identical apartments, larders, and woodsheds, and identical bowler hats, jackets, and overshoes.

Every so often Lulek would lean out of the dorozhka and look back down the street.

As if out of sheer spite, not one automobile, not one police wagon was shadowing the conspiratorial dorozhka!

"I have the impression that the bourgeois government of Poland has no interest in following you, imprisoning you, or taking an ax to your brain-pan, even though it's the mind of the working class. Even worse, I have the impression that this bourgeois government is taking the mickey out of you. It's taking the mickey because it regards you as a certain kind of zero on the revolutionary thermometer."

"Just sit still and stop making such an effort to be funny. That's not your job."

The dorozhka sped in its usual bumpy way over the Warsaw roadway that had been ruined during the war. But at a certain moment Lulek pulled on a large button sewn on the back of the driver's coat over his left kidney. The carriage came to a stop. The lawyer swiftly paid his cabby comrade, giving him such a large sum that the latter refrained from any kind of remonstrance involving high taxes and the cost of oats. The two conspirators sent off at a smart pace. Cezary didn't recognize the street they were on, even though they were in the downtown area and the stores looked rather imposing. Lulek soon entered a gateway. In these parts he had even stopped looking behind him. He mounted the steps nimbly to the fourth floor, not stopping till he stood in front of a door on which there could be seen a rather shoddily maintained nameplate bearing the inscription:

Polex—Polish export of agricultural products and manufactured goods.

“Agricultural products and manufactured goods,” Cezary read respectfully. “It doesn’t say where they’re being exported to...”

Lulek was unable to respond, since he was in the process of delivering a series of coughs. Despite this inconvenience he peered over the balustrade and listened intently. Finally, when it was clear no one was following him, he depressed the door handle and led Cezary in. The hallway of “Polex” contained so very much smoke—it was simply stacked up to the ceiling—that it would indeed have been worth exporting at least some of it to another country. In this place there stood various ordinary people in working clothes, and even peasant coats. Nor was there any shortage of middle-class suits. One person was carrying over his arm a carefully folded overcoat with a handsome silk lining.

Lulek slipped between them all and entered a large room that had once been a petty bourgeois living room. Here there was quite a large group of people, at least twenty-five of them. Lulek found a free seat among the people sitting against the wall and offered it to Baryka in an advisory tone:

“Sit down.”

The moment he sat, an individual with a sly-looking countenance and gimlet eyes came into view and fastened his unpleasant stare on Baryka. The law student whispered something to Cezary as the latter looked around the room. Here too there were generous quantities of smoke. People were conversing in a whisper and as it were furtively, like in church or at a funeral. As often happens at solemn occasions, Baryka was overcome

by a frivolous mood. He felt like laughing at what was going on and at all those gathered there. Above all he was amused by Lulek's expression, which was solemn and, as it were, inspired. He was also amused by the sly gentleman, who was short, snub-nosed, and balding, with a sparse beard that was slightly asymmetrical. He looked like a shopkeeper from a grocer's store who is fond of voicing his opinion, since no one in his neighborhood knows as much as he does about everything. The supposed shopkeeper inspected all those present most thoroughly. While this individual was animatedly examining everyone, the others mostly just stood there pompously or murmured to one another, as if they had left all care for their security in the hands of the enthusiast. Everyone was furiously smoking cigarette after cigarette. One had the impression that that was what they had come for. Taken together they did not seem particularly menacing.

All at once the door to the next room opened and seven people came in together.

It was only now that Cezary realized these were important personages. There were no greetings, only a few scattered coughs and the blowing of noses.

The seven newcomers took up places either at a desk that simulated the mysteries of this "Polex," or here and there about the room. The eyes of all those present turned to a young, slim, attractive woman of about thirty, who was dressed neatly and modestly, her hair combed in a natural way. Her face was oval-shaped, her eyes steely gray-blue, her nose shapely, and her whole expression captivating. Yet the principal figure seemed to

The Coming Spring

be a squat unshaven little blond man, a common, proletarian fellow of a typically Polish type. The eyes of this individual gazed out sharply, coolly, heedfully, with an expression of intelligence and good sense, courage and determination.

Something like a smile—but not a smile—flickered across his wrinkled face as he offered a kind of greeting to those assembled. It was immediately evident that he was going to speak at length—that he was already stroking the ideas he had caught, lining them up and preparing to release them from their cages. At his side, with his head propped on his hand, sat a somewhat older, gray-ing man lost in thought; he looked a little like a lord of the manor worrying about his winter crop of legumes and root vegetables. Next to him, wriggling on his chair sat a brawny, handsome young fellow, apparently a Ukrainian, for he wore a strange sort of shirt with red embroidery on an upright collar. Behind these three there were three more people, young and rather drab, who resembled office clerks.

The squat blond man took the floor. He cleared his throat and droned in a monotone:

“Comrades! We’re delighted to be able to gather here in a larger group to talk about our affairs.²⁶ As you no doubt know, our teacher, the immortal Karl Marx, said that the history of humanity is the history of class struggle. The struggle between the social classes is as old as human

²⁶ The speeches of this and the following speaker are based to a large extent on testimony by Stefan Królikowski and Czesława Grosserowa, two of the accused in a trial of Polish communists in Lwów in 1922.

society itself. By serving the class from which we come, each of us serves humanity, our mother. The bourgeoisie who hold power in their hands are cramped for room, and so wars between bourgeois states are unavoidable and continuous. The bourgeoisie of every country can no longer assuage their appetites by closing off the worker's access to life; they have to make war so as to wrest from one another various fertile lands, and mines, and all kinds of sources of wealth, and in this manner one country extends the range of its exploitation at the expense of another. The role of the bourgeoisie in promoting progress and culture is over. Theirs is a degenerate, destructive role. If the workers do not manage to force the bourgeoisie to step down, if they do not seize power from them, then humanity will be faced with perpetual so-called patriotic wars, massacres, murder, and backwardness. Only the working class can take on the task of economic progress. The way to this goal will of course be the organization of the working class.

“Such organization will eventually lead the working class in its taking power. To achieve this end, to introduce a new life based not on wars and slaughter and murder but on cooperation between people, it isn't enough for the workers of a single society to join together, but as a necessity, an inexorable imperative, there arises the idea of all the workers of every country and every state joining together: for the level of oppression, the norm of exploitation varies from state to state, but the essence of that exploitation is identical the world over. Across the globe our enemy is one and the same. And this is the source of our internationalism.”

The Coming Spring

Having laid out these truths the speaker patted the left pocket of his jacket and sat down. A moment later he pulled out a cardboard box of cigarettes and, lighting one of them, he drew smoke deep into his lungs. He also crossed his legs as if to indicate that he would say no more.

When the prolonged pause made it clear that the first comrade speaker would not issue any more information or declarations, the female comrade rose from her seat in a rather graceful and as it were melodious way, crossed to the desk and rested her hand on it. Her movement revealed the necessity of a kind of decorativeness somehow essential to beauty in motion. Her voice was pleasant, resonant, and low. She said:

“Comrades! The state is an organization in which certain people have power and other people are subject to that power. In every state, including this newly created one, there are ruling classes and there are classes that are ruled. So who rules in our country and on what basis? In this society, as in every society today—with the exception of one area of the globe—the authority to rule comes from the economic power of one class, the bourgeoisie, and from the accumulation of wealth and the possession of land and factories. This is the foundation of the power of our present overlords and this is the basis that entitles them to govern. In today’s society a worker cannot govern since he does not possess the land and wealth that alone assures the possession of power. Power in today’s state falls exclusively to the class of possessors, who use that power to protect their existence in society. Today’s state is an instrument by which

one class is oppressed by another. As representatives of the working class, we must oppose the state, for we are advocates for the international organization of workers.

“Someone might claim that by reaching for power in a given society, the working class is going to oppress other classes in just the same way, and that a state in the hands of the workers will also become an instrument of oppression. This could be the case if the existence of social classes were to be permanent. But the working class wishes to assume power not in order to tyrannize another social class but so as to eliminate the division of society into classes. The servitude of classes cannot exist where there are no classes at all, where all people will be workers. Our goal is simply that: to eliminate the rule of people over other people, to abolish the subjugation of some and the idleness of others, and thereby to create a society of working people who are equal and free.”

The speaker straightened her raven-black, almost violet-colored hair and continued in a slightly changed voice and a different tone:

“It’s been said here that our aim is the overthrow of capitalism and the triumph of socialism. If this struggle turns into an armed uprising, it will only be because the ruling classes fail to understand the historic moment we are living through. Nor do those classes understand our attitude toward the Soviets.

“When war broke out between Poland and Soviet Russia, a war whose goal was to diminish the territory over which the rule of the workers and peasants had already spread, what was our duty, the duty of representatives of the proletariat? Could we act in such a way as

The Coming Spring

to reduce the victory that the workers and peasants had already obtained? Obviously such a thing was out of the question! We would have betrayed the cause of the working class.”

Again there came a short pause in her speech. The speaker knitted her brow. Her slim, graceful, beautiful figure leaned slightly to one side. Once again the calm, metallic voice rang out:

“I’m a doctor by profession, and as a doctor I can recognize the putrefaction of today’s world at close hand, from my own experience. I’ve come to the conviction that in the present world a terrible degeneracy has come to dominate. The working class is degenerating in poverty and ignorance. The current capitalist system is leading the whole of humanity to its ruin. Here, in the city of Warsaw, 85 percent of school-age children have the beginnings of tuberculosis. The average life expectancy of a worker is 39 years; the average life expectancy of a priest is 60 years. In 1918, of 33,000 deaths in Warsaw 25,000 were caused by tuberculosis. The entire working class is being eaten away by poverty and disease. The life that a worker wasting away in poverty lives on this earth brings about degeneracy, while consumption and excess and overindulgence lead the bourgeoisie equally to degeneracy. The working masses are deprived of culture. Their creative forces are untapped. The level of culture among the bourgeoisie is also declining. Money rules everyone and everything.”

These pronouncements by the comrade doctor made a powerful impression on the audience. More, they brought about a certain stirring of minds that had hith-

erto been listening passively to expressions such as “class,” “proletariat,” “bourgeoisie,” “worker,” “class struggle” and so on. But as a consequence of these words Cezary also felt within him his customary contrariness. For each accentuation of certain truths with the aid of the spoken word, at the same time accentuated the gaps and faults in the argumentation, and furthermore reminded him of actual images that fundamentally contradicted the words spoken as truths. Almost every word roused a counter-word in the listener’s mind, and every declared truth called for a counter-truth to be put forward. When the comrade speaker fell silent for a moment as she gathered her arguments in order to continue her exposition, Cezary raised his hand and asked for the floor.

The comrade who had spoken first—and who at this meeting had the apparently inborn rank of chairman, probably out of respect for his contribution to the cause of the workers’ emancipation—looked in surprise at the young upstart interrupting a lecture by such an outstanding promulgator. But Cezary continued to demand the floor. Lulek grew worried. Pale and anxious, he jumped forward from the crowd into the middle of the room and, waving his hands, signaled to his impertinent friend to be quiet. It did no good. The chairman said:

“Now this comrade is speaking. Later on I’ll give you the floor, comrade.”

“Why not now? I only want to say a few words...”

“Very well then. But only a few words!” the smart comrade said reluctantly.

The Coming Spring

“I just wanted to say something,” began Cezary, “about—how shall I put it?—almost a formal matter. I wanted to mention the ineffectiveness of propaganda of the kind I heard a moment ago.

“If the working class in this country is being eaten away by poverty and disease; if this class is in a state of degeneracy or on the road to degeneracy; if this class is deprived of culture; then in what way and by what right can that very class be eager to take on the role of regenerating this society? Arguments of that kind ought not to be used. Such facts should rather be thrust far away, to the very back of the argumentation, since in fact it is an argument that contradicts the rationality of communism’s claims. A class eaten away by poverty and disease can only be the object of someone else’s act of regeneration, never a regenerating agent by itself. After all, a sick person suffering from a lack of culture cannot treat either himself or anyone else effectively. The sick man must be treated by an enlightened person—a doctor.”

“And in your opinion, comrade, who is supposed to be this regenerating agent, this doctor?” the first speaker asked with a malevolent, sarcastic smile.

“That I don’t know. I’m just listening. I’m learning here. I’m not laying out the pathways for the rational development of the population of the whole planet, nor even for this society here, which anyone who feels like it can bully to his heart’s content, however deprived of culture he may be. I really don’t know. But maybe—and I say this with all kinds of reservations—maybe the agent of such a process of regeneration of

everyone in this society, on the territory occupied by this young state, will be precisely the reborn and regenerated Poland.”

A stick poked into an anthill could not have caused greater commotion among the ants than this suggestion caused amongst those assembled. First of all Lulek appeared next to Cezary and, waving his clenched fists in the other man’s face, he spluttered some terrible threats. Other members of the audience also uttered the most unpleasant things one over the other. A hubbub arose. The chairman silenced it, calling for quiet in an ominous voice. He himself asked:

“So you, *sir*, maintain that Poland can substitute for the conscious and purposeful endeavors of an organized and active proletariat?”

“I don’t maintain anything; I’m not yet sure myself. I’m still finding out. I was just asking a question. I was asking a question because in many cases Poland, the Polish government, not only does not oppress the workers as such, but in disputes between the workers and the bourgeoisie over wages and rights it takes their side, the side of the workers. The assertion that the bourgeoisie rules Poland is not true.”

“Let me speak!” cried the young man in the embroidered shirt. “You don’t yet know, sir, what your Poland is; you’re still finding out, so let me inform you of certain details...”

“Comrade Karyla hasn’t finished yet...,” the president cautioned.

“I relinquish my turn in favor of comrade Mirosław,” comrade Karyla said with a reluctant gesture.

“You heard, comrades,” began Mirosław, “that this ‘gentleman’ in his formal comments raised Poland to a position which, if the country were sentient and able to express an opinion, it would probably find highly embarrassing. I need to cast some light on this assertion, I need to explain to him and to all of you...”

At this point all eyes turned on Cezary with such ferocity and loathing that it was as if the monstrous bourgeoisie who ruled Poland were sitting there in person on a wooden chair. This role of his as defender of the bourgeoisie brought him into utter ridicule and contempt, the more so because Lulek kept popping up from behind the backs of others and prattling something maliciously and mockingly, his words lost in a hysterical coughing fit.

“In your Poland, sir...,” began the speaker.

“This Poland is not yet ‘my’ Poland. Please refer to it as Poland, the present-day Polish state,” Baryka retorted angrily.

“Very well! I’m a typical accommodating Ukrainian. You can beat me and tear out my hair—I’ll always be sweetness and light...In Poland, the present-day Polish state, various nations that it has appropriated find themselves oppressed. We are opposed to this enslavement of nations. We’re advocates not only of class freedom, but of the freedom of subjugated and oppressed nations within Poland. This isn’t remotely to say that we have any interest in internal solidarity with those nations as wholes, since in the heart of each nation there exists a class struggle...”

“Not in all of them,” interrupted Cezary. “To the best of my knowledge, not all of the nations subjugated by Poland have managed to develop a bourgeoisie. There are some among them who entirely lack the cancer of a bourgeoisie, and so in such subjugated regions class struggle exists only on paper as a feature of this party’s program.”

“So much the worse for Poland!” rejoined the speaker. “In the undeveloped nations the role of the bourgeoisie is played by the Poles. For those wretches the word ‘Poles’ means precisely lords, owners of latifundia, potentates, allies of the tsarist and ‘national’ governments, builders of factories and industries. But I already said that our party condemns the fact that in the new Polish state, which is still unable to get over the complaints and laments that it learned by heart about its own recent national bondage, the freedom of a whole series of nations is violated and suppressed. From the moment the Polish state arose, the workers’ movement has been persecuted...”

“You mean the communist workers’ movement, which took the Russian side in the Polish–Russian war, as has been stated here?” asked Cezary.

“Yes! Communist!” confirmed the speaker, hammering his fist on the desk.

All those gathered there stirred and closed in on Cezary. The latter was overcome by truculence, a rancorous desire to contradict, to present objections, even to deliberately provoke. He remained silent, gazing evenly at the speaker and his supporters.

The Coming Spring

“The prisons are filled to bursting with activists for the workers and activists of persecuted ethnic groups.²⁷ Four thousand political prisoners are behind bars in Poland. The conditions these prisoners are kept in are often worse than those in the notorious tsarist *tyurmas*; they transform the prisons into torture chambers. An indication of this are the numerous hunger strikes, which are becoming more and more frequent every year. These hunger strikes have in several cases ended with the death of the protesting prisoners. During the hunger strikes the warders beat the strikers mercilessly. Confessions are extracted by force, by means of beatings and medieval tortures. Questioning is conducted with the use of electric shocks. Police commissioner Kajdan used electric shocks on Nykyfor Bortnichuk, who was stripped naked and interrogated...”²⁸

“Excuse me—I have a question. Is the minister of justice aware of interrogations of this kind, involving torture by electric shock? Does the government issue special instructions concerning such torture? Does the Polish government assign funds for buying equipment to administer electric shocks? I’d just like to know...,” said Cezary, who was feeling perplexed and disheartened.

²⁷ Much of the information given here Żeromski took, in places verbatim, from an open letter on the subject published by the Polish Communist Party in June 1924.

²⁸ Like the other individuals named here, Leon Kajdan was a real person, a police commissioner from Lwów. He sued Żeromski for defamation of character, claiming that he had not committed the acts he was accused of in *The Coming Spring*.

"I don't know. We aren't well informed and, truth be told, we aren't even interested in knowing who orders this apparatus and who pays for it. We know exactly who does these things. The police beats literally everyone."

"I wonder whether they also beat those who blow up powder magazines, and next to the magazines try to blow up entire neighborhoods inhabited by poor Jews?"

The response was a hollow silence. But the silence was crisscrossed with looks that did not bode well.

Cezary felt within himself an ineffable rage, a sense of defeat and of torment, just as he had when he struck Barwicki in the head and lashed the face of the woman he loved above all else.

"I won't answer these questions, because I have something more important to communicate," continued comrade Mirosław. "I want all of you to remember this well, comrades! The Polish police applies tortures like so: the victim's hands are cuffed together and both his knees are squeezed between them. Between his hands and his knees a metal pole is inserted, so the interrogated man spins in a circle. Then the prisoner is turned on his back and is whipped on the soles of his feet so long that he loses consciousness. Then he's brought round and the 'interrogation' starts all over again. Water is poured into his throat and nose till he chokes."

"Is this true?" asked Cezary, standing up.

"Is it true? Just wait a minute, sir—I'll give you truth! A blacksmith from Wasilkowszczyzna farm in Wołków county, by the name of Kozłowski, had his hands tied, his knees pushed between them, and an iron pole put

The Coming Spring

between his hands and his knees. Two policemen took hold of the pole, lifted Kozłowski up and smashed him against the wall. Kozłowski bounced off the wall like a ball then fell to the floor, from which he also bounced back. The whole business went on for fifteen minutes. Kozłowski was released and died three days later in agony.”

“What was he being punished for?”

“It makes no difference what he was being punished for!”

“Who witnessed the incident?”

“Is this not enough for you? It’s still not enough? I’ll tell you more! Beatings on the soles of the feet during interrogations, putting pencils or other hard objects between the fingers then squeezing the fingers together, teeth being knocked out with signet rings, fingernails being crushed, besides the good old-fashioned Polish-style beatings that involve being smashed in the face, and the traditional breaking of ribs with the heel—all of this is in fashion. This is true! Is this still too little for you? I can tell you more! In the village of Dziedowo in Mińsk county, a group of pregnant women were flogged to death with birches. Is that still not enough?”

“Leave me alone!” shouted Cezary in a veritable rage. He pushed his chair back impetuously and quit the meeting. But before he slammed the door he continued to hear close by him Lulek’s cough, his grating laugh, and his hissing, whistling, moaning syllables:

“Shoo! Shoo! Shoo! Shoo, little boy! You dear patriot! Brave soldier boy! Go and tattle to Uncle Gajowiec! He’ll comfort you! He’ll justify it all to you. He’ll deny it

all! He'll explain away all the rumors spread by the subversives and traitors and enemies..."

*

As he walked through the streets of the city, the winter fog hanging over the distended apartment buildings, Cezary was wrestling with his soul. He heard within himself his father's terrifying cry and his mother's dull sobbing. He lurched to one side then the other, not knowing which was the right way. He disputed with some, disputed with others, but did not have his own path beneath his feet.

"This time I really got a slap in the face!" he whispered in his utter despondency.

What could he do in light of all this, entirely alone as he was? Lulek's mockery sending him to Gajowiec barred the road to Gajowiec. There was no one, no one...

He came out onto a broad street. Here there were masses of people splashing through the watery mud. The snow swept from the streets created barricades on either side of the sidewalks. Pedestrians were scuttling along. Their feet sank into damp and filth, while their heads were swathed in the city fog. Taken together, they created a bizarre phantasmagoria of human life. Words of accusation reverberated in Cezary's head. The laughter of all those people back there beset his ears. They had been accusing him! It was against him that they had directed their merciless laughter, and all those terrible stories. What did they want of him? Oh, of course, in him they sensed an enemy, since he had joined the

The Coming Spring

struggle against the Red Army. That was why they had assailed him with such furious hatred. If it hadn't been for the fact that he had fought battles and walked across the fields looking for his father's houses of glass... Torment echoed within him like the howling of a lonesome dog in an empty field.

"They're aiming to create a paradise on earth—like in Baku..." he muttered to himself. His hearty laughter cheered him a little and came to his succor like a good friend. Cezary bucked up and walked on more briskly. He was cold. The clinging damp of melting snow impregnated with manure and urine penetrated his body to the marrow of his bones. He needed to drink something! To warm up, hang it!

All at once he noticed before him the huge window panes of a fashionable café. Lively music beckoned as if it were calling to him. The place was buzzing like a hive. Busy profiteer-bees hummed about the immense room. After a long search a free seat was found at a table already occupied by several black marketeers. Baryka asked with a nod of the head if he might sit there, and they consented with a reluctant nod of the head. He ordered tea and a small shot of rum. So the other men wouldn't think he was interested in their schemes, he turned to face the window. He barely saw the whole café, and seemed not to hear the music. His seat was close to the large window. He had the impression that there was no pane and that he was in the open air. In the middle of the street, on a raised strip of dressed stone, a somber policeman was pacing back and forth in a fine, handsome, dapper uniform.

Five steps in one direction: one—two—three—four—five...Five steps in the opposite direction: one—two—three—four—five...Then about turn. A veritable pendulum.

“Aha! So he’s one of those who stick pencils between the fingers of prisoners and then squeeze their fingers together with a special device. One of those who puts iron rods between tied hands and legs, turning men into spinning wheels...”

Resting his chin on his fists, Baryka watched this monstrous figure. He observed the torturer carefully, measuring him from head to foot with an intent gaze. And as he took a sip of rum it seemed to him in a half-dreamlike vision that it was he himself who stood on the raised stone strip wearing a police uniform. In his semi-dream he had the impression that he was the one walking up and down, the one guilty of all evil.

He stares ceaselessly with his watchful eyes into the plashing, stormy river of things. About his head is a tumultuous thudding and banging like the beating of hammers against anvils. But that head is still vigilant and still calm and alert. No one and nothing can distract his attention from that long street. It will not be distracted by the crying of his little sick son. What of it that at this moment the doctor is turning him from one side to the other, searching for an ominous rash? What of it that anguish is opening beneath his uniform like a wound from a bandit’s dagger-thrust?

Five steps in one direction: one—two—three—four—five...Five steps in the other direction: one—two—three—four...

The Coming Spring

No one will see the tears flowing inside and no one will hear a complaint from the tightly compressed lips. All around, high and low, are mute and imperturbable bricks, footworn, slippery stones, silent concrete, rusted iron, blind plaster and perspiring window panes. The half-perspiring windows gaze coldly down. Brick-built houses tower up, striving to imitate ashlar and marble with their shabby paintwork. Imperturbable is the great electric street lamp that even in the daytime shines over the policeman's head into the dark, foggy distance. All around, swift motor cars dash left and right, bearing elegant, comfortably and smartly dressed Jewish women in astrakhan furs, nouveaux-riches in expensive beaver furs, and dignitaries in expensive cord. Among all these hurrying people he alone is imperturbable as the street lamp over his head, as the bricks fixed into the wall, as the stones, as the glazed windows—and he is imprisoned like iron and concrete.

Back and forth he goes, like a pendulum separating the streaming sands of humankind into two. With a mechanical gesture he divides the plashing, stormy river of things and sends it one way or the other. At times he hurries life along. Here he beckons to hasten a wretched Jew pushing a handcart on which there is some dire load. The crossbar does battle with his feeble hands, digging into his breast-bone and even taking aim at the intimate parts of his body so as—God forbid!—to harm them. How great the load must be, since it's so hard to push it! The little wheels fall into the holes in the wooden sidewalk and the strength of one pair of emaciated hands, one breast-bone and one paltry belly cannot

heave them out and push them on. The crossbar is a personal enemy, an aggressor, a tormentor and persecutor. Would it not be better to pull the cart like a horse instead of pushing it like a human? He is wearing a charming little cap with a small peak—a disguised yarmulke—and a shortish, knee-length overcoat—a disguised gaberdine—not especially warm for such damp weather, yet too warm for such arduous work. Somewhat excessively muddy pants—ugh!—muddy Jewish pants! Somewhat excessively wet socks—ugh!—wet Jewish socks! The crooked heels of his fine-wrought elastic-sided boots stumble from pothole to pothole, and his scrawny legs totter along in blighted trousers spattered with all the excrement of the street.

Oh, how painful the gaze directed at the constable by that living human corpse! Sweat streams down his greenish face. The complexion of that face truly does not belong amid the hubbub of a city street seething with the power of life—but rather suits the delight of eternal rest beneath the sandy soil and the greensward. And what is there to be upset about? Fibrinous bronchitis and the aforementioned tuberculosis carry off twenty-five thousand a year. One of twenty-five thousand—who cares!

“Move along!” at last comes the order.

Could the constable be thinking in his heart at this very moment:

“Why are you pushing a load beyond your strength, friend? Why are you destroying the last beats of your heart with someone else’s excessive load?”

“So as to gnaw a mouthful of bread and have a sip of vodka, friend.”

The Coming Spring

Madness will not break out of its secret lair to grasp the malicious crossbar and aid the porter in pushing his impossible burden.

Five steps in one direction: one—two—three—four—five. Five steps in the opposite direction: one—two—three—four...

He won't be moved by the little coal thieves scampering out of alleyways, recesses, dens, and crevices, like rats. When the great coal cart arrives to supply the gentleman in the neatly painted apartment building with exquisite warmth during the harsh days of winter—when huge blackened men with black sacks on their heads start to shovel great lumps into the hideous window of the cellar—when the horses steam, the people grunt and curse, and a wet black dust settles on the slippery sidewalks, to the consternation of passers-by—the children appear as if the frozen earth had discharged them from cracks in the soil, or as if the north wind had blown them into existence from among the snowdrifts.

They blossom from nothing and from nowhere, like frost-flowers on the window pane of the gentleman's warm apartment. Each of them has a small wicker basket or a bag at their belt patched together from strips of canvas from old aprons. Each carries a small brush made of birch twigs that at some point had been removed surreptitiously from the substantial brooms of caretakers, or even gathered dishonestly from broom stores when the owner was not looking. Quicker than a flock of sparrows descending on food thrown down for them, with movements swift as blinks of the eye, with

sudden hops, leaps, and turns, squatting and spreading their legs the boys sweep up the dust that has fallen from the concrete ledges onto the sidewalk, and from the muddy bumps and potholes of the roadway. Their fingers seize hold of the smallest little pieces, fragments broken off larger blocks, the tiniest lumps. With their raw hands they rake out the dust mixed with the other dense matter floating in the gutter. With practiced, nimble movements they toss the detritus they have found into their sacks and baskets. All of this happens dextrously, rapidly, in flight, in a bound, in a moment, before the constable turns round, before he notices, before he sees, before he leaps forward to defend the property of anyone who possesses money. Then they scatter like starlings, scuttering off between the automobiles like mice, scurrying away like agile little puppies, blowing in every direction like the wind, disappearing like specters, and soaking into the earth like the rain.

And once again the constable gazes with a cool eye at the zooming automobiles, at their many colors—gray, green, dark blue—and their ever changing shapes. He listens to their roaring and bleating, which is as it should be in this chaos. He maintains order in their endless motion. He is observed briefly by a gentleman inside a car, in whose earnest figure great matters, great affairs, great business, great profits speed by. Over there is a gentleman wearing eyeglasses the size of the wheels on the weakly Jew's handcart. Great ideas, great schemes, great plans. The man has a smile on his lips and an exquisite pride in his gaze: a visit, a delightful conversation, a meeting.

The Coming Spring

A pallid lady enwrapped becomingly in otter furs. Her happiness is those otter furs. She lives to show herself in them to all those who hurry by alone and frozen cold. The thrilling scent of perfume. An adorable young lady to the right, a blond young lady to the left. An officer. What raging glances! O freedom! O wanton pleasure! O life! O happiness! O youth, youth! Amid them all, between a hearse and a huge truck, amid packed streetcars and mudstained dorozhkias, one fine fellow sneaks along. His little hat is tipped over his ear. The ear is thrust into the velvet collar of his quilted jacket. A cigarette between his teeth. Hands thrust deep into pockets. Shoes gleaming from a fresh polishing a moment ago, on the street corner.

There you are, you villain! When everyone else is asleep or suffocating in lascivious embraces—all those dashing by in automobiles, those rattling along in dorozhkias, those squashed into the crowded streetcars, and those marching on foot, wading through the filthy slush on the concrete sidewalk—those dozing in pubs or laboring sleeplessly till their strong skulls crack—the constable rises to his feet. On the kind of pitiless night when one wouldn't send a dog out, in foul and freezing weather, when the rain is lashing down and the gale howling—at such times he creeps through the night to hammer at the door of the villain who has already done away with a hundred innocent people—unbeknownst to anyone. He orders him to open the door! And the other man is not asleep. He's waiting. Both raise their short gun barrels at the same time and both peer into the darkness. Which of them will be first to seize an opportune moment?

Who will draw a bead on the other? Who will beat the other to it? Five steps to the right.—About face.—Five steps to the left.

Oh, constable, constable, why is your face so sorrowful? After all, you have the right to conduct interrogations with electric shocks; you have the right to put pencils between the fingers and then squeeze them together with a special device. The entire spinning world rests upon you, relies on you. If it were not for you, calm and alert, they would be at each other's throats, writhing in a tangle of desires. Not only would they tear the clothes and underwear off one another; they'd gouge out one another's eyes, wrench the living soul out of each other's quivering innards and trample it right here in the mud of the street.

Oh, constable, constable, why is your face so sorrowful?

His drooping head propped up on his fists, Baryka was plunged in bitter thought. He still did not know where to go when he left the café; he was still in two minds. Then he recalled a sentence from Plato's *Apology*, which he had translated not so long ago in school in Baku:

In me there is an inner voice which, every time it speaks, always discourages me from doing whatever I was intending to do at the given moment, yet never encourages me to do anything else...

The old sages were familiar with this inner voice. They knew that such a voice, the inner daemon, plagues people and leads them astray. They called it a prophetic

The Coming Spring

voice, a phenomenon that came from the gods. What could be simpler than to leave the café and go straight back to the meeting, confess his mistake, deliver a rousing speech, earn a rousing ovation—commit a thousand acts so rousing that this old earth, which had already heard so many moans, would moan once again like never before. What of it, when the inner prophetic voice discouraged him, saying that such a road would lead nowhere. Such a road would lead to a bloody void...

*

Yet in the end he had to go back to work, to Gajowiec. Cezary hoped he wouldn't find the "old man" at home at this time and would be able to work in peace and put his exhausted mind in order. But as if out of spite, Gajowiec was "installed" at home. Upon seeing him, instead of calming his exhausted mind as he had hoped, Baryka felt the most hellish fury. Immediately after greeting him he said with diabolic relish:

"I've just been at a communist meeting."

"I congratulate you on the company you keep!"

"Well, where am I supposed to go?"

"What do you mean, where are you supposed to go? You're supposed to study medicine."

"Right now I'm taking lessons about Poland from the communists."

"The blind teaching the blind."

"No!" exclaimed Cezary. "No! If it weren't for them I'd be completely in the dark. You don't know the whole truth either, sir."

“Then I’ll learn it from you!”

“That’s right! My mother died not out of poverty or from being beaten, and not from sickness alone, but out of longing for Poland. My father...My father and my mother! And you, the ruling classes—what have you done with the longing of those who died? You’ve built a torture chamber! They beat people here! They beat them to death in the prisons! They torture them! A policeman armed with instruments of torture—that’s the sole mainstay of Poland!”

“You’re blaspheming, young man!”

“I’m not blaspheming. I’m telling the truth. If I were to start ‘blaspheming’ I wouldn’t come back to you any more. I came back again.”

“Again?”

“Again! And I ask you: why don’t you give land to people who have none?”

“We don’t have the money to purchase it.”

“Purchase! You don’t have it in you to crush the nobility, who drove Poland into bondage once before. You lack the spirit of Louis XI²⁹ to crush the power of the nobles and turn this country into a community of hard-working people. Why do you tyrannize non-Poles in the name of Poland? Why is there so much poverty here? Why is every recess in the wall filled with beggars? Why do children have to sweep wet coal dust from the street so as to have a modicum of warmth in this harsh winter?”

²⁹ The first absolute monarch of France (reigned 1461–1483), who broke the power of the feudal nobles.

The Coming Spring

“Hold on! Just a minute! Too many questions at once! One thing at a time!”

“You’ll find an explanation for everything! I know! But I don’t want to hear it, I don’t want your explanations. I want refutations in action!”

“We offer refutations every day—slowly, with difficulty, in small amounts—but we do offer them.”

“I’m asking the questions now! And I ask: What are you all waiting for? Fate handed you a free homeland, a free state, the kingdom of the Jagiellon monarchs! It gave you poor, simple, foreign peoples so you could warm them and clasp them to the heart of this Power, this Lady, this Mother. With this city it gave you the capital of freedom! You’re waiting! You’re waiting! You’re waiting till they put the yoke on you once again.”

“They won’t put the yoke back on! We’ll perish before they do! We’ll never let them do that to us in a million years!”

“I don’t believe it! You’ll talk and talk, all of you, till you come up with reasons for your new bondage. You’ll give the reasons for everything and explain the consequences. Young people will die for you wise fellows—as usual. I know what I’m saying, because I didn’t sit tight at home when young people went off to die. And you’ll beat the young people once again with that wisdom of yours, because your only wisdom is the policeman—and the soldier.”

“Yes, the soldier! And what else are you offering for our defense?”

“For defense I’m offering reforms! Reforms that would surpass those of the Bolsheviks and the Ger-

mans, and which would make the other peoples of these parts look to us instead of to Russia. But you're all small people—and cowards!”

“That’s simply an insult. There’s not an ounce of truth in what you say.”

“You’re all afraid of a great act—a great agrarian reform, a never-before-seen transformation of the old prison system. You have to chase around after ‘Europe.’ These things never happened anywhere, so how could they possibly happen here? Do you have the boldness of Lenin to begin something never seen before, to demolish the old and institute the new? You only know how to abuse, to defame, to gossip. Do you have within you the dogged fortitude of those people—the steadfast *virtus* that may be mistaken in its calculations, but which is beyond a doubt a great attempt to improve humanity? No one expects you to become proponents or imitators or implementers of those other ideas, to be Bolsheviks; but do you possess their fortitude?”

*“‘I’ll never boast of certainty
In fortitude; the sacrifice
Made by my loved ones frightens me;
I’ll not send others to th’abyss.’”*³⁰

“Those are old, Romantic, aristocratic texts that are called on when needed to obscure accusations brought today. You’ve allegedly already shaken off Romanticism,

³⁰ From the 1848 poem “Psalm of Grief” by Zygmunt Krasiński.

The Coming Spring

yet when it comes to rebutting an accusation, you turn to a Romantic quotation, exactly like a priest bending biblical verses to suit the defense of some thesis. The author of those lines 'sent others to the abyss' and wasn't 'frightened by the sacrifice made by his loved ones'—all the time, unseen, unnoticed, routinely, he drove his serfs to death, but he was frightened by the 'sacrifice made by his loved ones,' in other words by the nobles. It's not a question of sacrifice but of fortitude, the fortitude to build a new vision. What vision of Poland do you have in this extraordinarily new present-day world? What vision?"

"I asked you to work with me. These piles of paper contain a new vision of Poland."

"These are piles of paper and nothing more. There are hungry people in the villages and exhausted people in the factories and homeless people in the suburbs. How do you all intend to improve the lives of the Jews crowded into the ghettos? You don't know a thing. You have no vision."

"We're not interested in some vision dreamed up in the brain of an idealist and totally mismatched with life, but in the wise organization of actual life according to principles of the wisest possible co-existence."

"No! Poland is in urgent need of a great vision! It could be agricultural reform, the creation of new industries, any great deed that people could breathe like air. This place is stuffy. The existence of this great state, this golden homeland, this sacred word that the martyrs all died for, the existence of Poland—for a vision! Your vision is an old slogan of fools who ca-

roused the country away: 'We'll muddle through somehow or other!'

"We have too many enemies around us and elsewhere in the world, inside and outside, to be able to develop and establish a vision on our pathways today or in the foreseeable future. When I'm attacked in the night my vision is to defend myself. To defend ourselves from a fearful coalition of enemies—that's the prime vision. Not to yield up sacred Poland, not to yield Lwów or Poznań or the sea coast or Vilnius to the Musovites or the Germans or the Lithuanians—to anyone who reaches out their hand to grab our territory. There are unredeemed lands still groaning under enemy occupation. Not to allow kindred peoples to be russified..."

"Flog them to death but don't let them be russified!"

"If people are being flogged to death in this country as you say, then it's for being russified, for selling themselves to Moscow, into the service of Moscow against Poland. These are the bloody and despicable methods of our enemies that we employ out of necessity."

"Out of necessity...What hypocrisy! What duplicity!"

"You know Moscow. Let me ask you: Do they also do what we do here and punish those who betray them, who rebel against the established law? I'll mention one fact: Witold Jarkowski, a brilliant inventor, professor, outstanding theoretician of aviation, a wonderful individual, a gem of a human being, was taken hostage (now there's a fine law!), and as the tenth in line was made to stand in front of the wall despite his total innocence and was shot to death in despicable fashion..."

The Coming Spring

“In this country things oughtn’t to be worse, nor the same, but better!”

“In this country they will be better. Within the borders of this Poland which fate has given to our generation, there will be created unified, free, and equal estates. We’ll work everything out. We’ll build a shared house. But we have to begin with the foundations, and above all we have to have material to build with. You can’t build without money.”

“I know: the ‘złoty’...”

“Precisely. You took the words out of my mouth. We can’t let our countrymen in the Ukraine be handed over into anyone’s bondage. This mesh of Ukrainian, Polish, and Lithuanian peoples has to live in the Republic of Poland. When we build our house, we’ll give ‘our Ukrainian brothers respect, brotherhood, and every equal right,’³¹ and ‘every family land of their own in the care of the community.’ All this will happen! We’ll make amends for wrongs, we’ll settle our differences, we’ll rise to our feet...”

*

One day in early March, in the hallway outside the dissecting room Cezary Baryka was handed a letter by a

³¹ A distorted quotation from the “List of Principles” drawn up by Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) for the Polish Legion he founded in Italy in 1848, whose purpose was to fight for Italian independence from Austrian rule. The text of the original reads: “Every Slav residing in Poland is entitled to brotherhood, citizenship, and equal rights in all things.”

city messenger. The envelope clearly bore his correct address and name, so there could be no suspicion of any mistake. It contained a sheet of paper with the following message:

Sir—I am in Warsaw briefly. If you are still willing, please meet with me. At two o'clock this afternoon I shall be in the Saski Gardens by the fountain.—Laura.

The words pierced Cezary to the core. In the first moment he was struck by suspicion: "It's Barwicki trying to entice me into a trap. He's using the name 'Laura' as bait. There, by the fountain, a gang of ruffians will set upon me. It's a good place, because a person can wash his wounds right afterwards." Then came doubts: "Why Barwicki? Why on earth would he do this in the gardens, by the fountain, in a secluded spot? If it were Barwicki he'd do it in a café somewhere, in the theater, on a public square. Why should it not be Laura?"

Laura! The sound of the name, the whisper of the name, its fragrance...

Cezary did not return to his less than fragrant corpses. He immediately washed up, disinfected himself, cleaned and aired himself. He dashed off in the direction of the streetcar. He still had a lot of time, so he was able to observe the place from a distance. He seemed ridiculous to himself as he checked out the vicinity of the fountain from behind the trees on various sides. The few passers-by were splashing along the muddy paths and were probably surprised to see a young fellow doggedly pacing up and down the empty

The Coming Spring

avenue. More than one of those ladies and gentlemen were thinking:

“Aha, no doubt an assignation...Oh, young man, young man!”

An assignation! With Laura! After so many regrets, so much longing and loss and despair! He gave a shiver. His heart was beating. He was short of breath. Sorrow and radiant joy. Memories and dreams. Fears and entreaties. No one was coming. No one passed by the fountain, which became a form of torment, a bizarre figure of yearning, a chimera filled with hallucinations. There were moments when Cezary was on the point of fleeing. He should go, he should go! Then impatience swept him up so abruptly that he couldn't catch his breath and stay in place for a single second; then cold contempt filled his breast like poison, curdling the blood in his veins. Mighty comical were these leaps from one extreme to the other, from the coldest reasoning that this was quite clearly a stratagem, to melting in the joy of a tenderness that saw nothing and refused to know anything. His heart pounded in his chest.

At a certain moment Cezary saw Laura coming out of the colonnade from the direction of Saski Square. The sight did not fill him with the joy he had expected to feel. But his eyes feasted themselves on the truth that it was her. She looked to him perhaps five or six years younger. A real young lady of sixteen. She wore a knee-length sable fur coat and a short gown, a most fetching hat with a black feather, and high white elastic-sided boots. She was the most beautiful of women! She was the most elegant woman in the city! Oh, how beautiful

she was! What an indescribable sensation enswathed her as she moved forward, looking about the fountain! Cezary gazed at her, at this incomparable picture, and was unable to move. He experienced a moment of absolute happiness. Nothing mattered! Oh, nothing mattered! Life and death had no meaning. For it was her, Laura. She spotted him from a distance. She raised the two sable-fur hems of her sleeves to shade her eyes. She stood still and waited. He came up and stopped in front of her.

"Are you perhaps going to strike me in the face again with a whip?" she asked quietly.

"No," he groaned. "Never! I was so unhappy then... Thank you for wanting to meet with me."

"Why did you leave there?"

"You married Barwicki."

"That has nothing to do with anything."

He giggled like a fool.

"Is he here, in Warsaw?"

"He is."

"Then he's probably spying on us."

"Are you afraid, Czarus?"

"Yes, I'm afraid. I've already shown how afraid of him I am. Oh, I'm so afraid of him! I'd like to get my hands on him. You know? I'd be prepared to start a revolution just so I could get my hands on him."

"A fine revolution that would be if its main purpose was to meet face to face with Barwicki. Do you mean to capture me and torture me just as you do him?"

"You... You—no. You alone I love on this earth. You I love to distraction. I don't know how else to put it so I

The Coming Spring

say it like in the theater or in a romance novel: 'to distraction.' You are—Laura."

"But surely you're still angry with me?"

"Am I angry?... We'll never be together! That man will always be with you! Tell me, is that not a matter for despair?"

"Don't think about it."

"What am I supposed to think about? Can you suggest what I should be thinking about?"

"So you've been thinking about me?"

"I've thought about you day and night. Everywhere, always! In the dissecting room, at work, while I'm writing columns of figures for a certain civil servant, on the street, at home, when music's playing, in the café, at the theater, at table, during conversations and debates and quarrels, wherever I've been. You were standing beside me. I felt you right behind me, I smelled your scent, I felt you inside of me, in my blood, in my chest, in my veins. I kissed you in the night—probably when *he* was kissing you; I stretched out my hands to you across all the earth—probably when *he* was embracing you! You're so uncomplicated, so lovely; you're so elegant, so graceful, so fragrant, refined, sophisticated, my sweet, chosen one! You're encircled by fanciful, non-existent colors! You are Laura! Laura! Laura!"

They were walking along a side path. The bare trees stood motionless, as if they were listening to these declarations. The trees seemed somehow swollen from the damp and the thaw, and the glutinizing vapors raging in the earth after long rains. Mrs. Laura Barwicka was weeping bitterly.

“For so many months you weren’t there!” said Cezary. “I’d started to think you never existed at all. I’d started to think you were just beautiful poetry that I’d read in a happy moment in my childhood. I’d started to think you were a confused story, a dream of mine about a beautiful woman, the most marvelous woman in the human race. In my longing I’d started to beg you to come to me in my dreams. And now you’ve come in person. You’re even more ravishing than at Leniec. Even sleeker, more alluring, more lovely. You’re so slim now, so soft. But you’re so pale, so sad. Why are you sad?”

She did not answer. One tear after another poured down her face in an abundant stream. She had raised her veil and her cheeks could be seen with their wintry, translucent white complexion. She was unable to raise her eyes because they were filled with floods of tears. She was unable to speak because her mouth was full of salty bitterness. In the end she came to a stop.

“Look what you’ve done!” she brought forth from deep inside.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, Czarusi!” she burst out. “If you hadn’t started that brawl back then, I might have been able to find a way out of my plight.”

“That brawl...,” he repeated like an echo.

“I might have gotten free of him! I might have found a way to disentangle my affairs, straighten them out. I would have worked myself to death but I would have gotten clear in the end. It was your doing that I had to get married without delay, immediately! I had to either salvage my reputation or perish. You madman, you thug,

The Coming Spring

you Russian schoolboy! I could have been yours, and now I have to be with Barwicki—I have to be his wife!”

She collapsed in mute, stifled, spasmodic, frantic weeping. For a short while she got the better of herself, and she reflected for a moment. She was barely able to force the words out:

“Now I have to...I have to...you know...die of grief...over you...”

Cezary staggered, feeling that now he was the one to be struck across the eyes with a fearful blow from a riding-crop. All words dried up in his throat. His very voice died within him. He uttered nothing in reply. He stood there foolish and silent. Should he beg her for something? Ask her forgiveness for something? Promise her something? Justify himself for something? He was incapable of a single thought, a single notion, a single decision. He whimpered quietly:

“Let’s go from here...”

“Where to?”

He had no idea where to. Who was she, this woman? It was only now that he had come to know her. If he could have dropped to his knees before her, if he could have pressed the hem of her gown to his lips, if he could have kissed her feet!

Various people were passing by, raising their eyes to look at a lady so beautiful and weeping so bitterly. It really was necessary to leave that place. So he said again:

“Let’s go from here!”

“But where are we to go?”

She raised her eyes to him. A wan smile passed like a stray guest across her exquisite lips.

"No, Czarus," she said. "I won't go anywhere with you any more."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Then why on earth did you summon me here?"

"I summoned you," she sobbed from the deepest reaches of pain, "to look at you, the one and only love of my heart! At my murdered, murdered happiness! What did you think—that this would be an assignation? That we'd go to a hotel? A good-looking married woman going to a hotel..."

"I didn't think anything."

"So you say I've lost weight? It's because of you, you know! And what about you?"

Her eyes were dry now and they looked out, red and swollen, with indescribable love, with boundless sweetness. She lingered over Cezary's mouth, eyes, chin, and cheeks as if she were physically kissing them with her gaze. A hundred times she looked up at him and a hundred times turned away.

"So that's how it is," he sighed. "Now you're Barwicki's lawful wedded wife."

"Yes."

"And the wedding stands in the way of our happiness?"

She hesitated, rocking in place, unable to go on. In the end she said:

"It's not exactly the wedding...What do I care about Barwicki! But it's my word. The word of honor I gave."

"Your word of honor..."

The Coming Spring

“Yes, Czarusí. I was free and you were free. We were both free as birds. We were mad with happiness beneath our sky. But you trod all that underfoot!”

“That’s a lie! You’re the one who’s treading it underfoot, right now! Our happiness!”

“Don’t be angry with me! At this moment don’t be angry with me! I’ll live this moment...for long months, long months...Don’t take this moment away from me!”

She tried to take his hand discreetly, but he pulled it away. He was seized once again by the fiend of jealousy, the most terrible of all demons. He gave a wild laugh:

“Your word of honor! Your word of honor!”

He bowed from a distance.

“Czarusí! Don’t go! Czarusí!” she called in despair, in her frenzied torment.

But he did not turn round again. Savage emotions had settled deep within him; it was as if the heart of an enraged hawk had stirred in his breast, as if a vengeful hawk’s talons had grown from his hands. He strode away, splashing through the mud, whistling intently, amid the noiseless trees.

*

It was the first day in which the coming spring could be felt. A southern wind had blown up and had turned the piles of snow swept up along the sidewalks into liquid mud. The dry, altered wind blew into hair and mouths, into nostrils, on cheeks, and into the ears of small children hurrying to school. Thousands of sparrows chirruped joyfully, till they were fit to drop, boldly

and resolutely, on the ledges of the crumbling walls, on the bends of gutters, and on the black branches of the chestnut tree imprisoned in the courtyard of the Jewish apartment building. Pale green little Jews poked their blueish noses from their cellars and from what passed as their apartments on Franciszkańska Street. On the clean avenues pedestrians walked merrily along, stamping their dry shoes on the concrete sidewalk, which was drying before their eyes. On the corner of the street there had already appeared a young street-walker in a premature springtime outfit, aiming to lure rogues with an increased display of bare flesh. A spring cloud sailed over the city like the angel of God that loveth equally the virtuous and the wicked. The bell of a distant steeple rang out as if the angel flying through the heavens had instructed it to call to all the paupers tormented and consumed by illness: "It's springtime, o earthly paupers!"

On that very day, a huge workers' march stretched from Nowy Świat across Trzech Krzyży Square, heading in the direction of the Belweder. There were those who had lost their jobs as the result of a factory lockout, those striking to protest rising prices and the impossibility of making ends meet on the paltry wages they received—and committed communists. The latter took the lead—the young guard, or rather vanguard, of the Soviets.

These people had gathered from low-lying Powiśle and distant Wola. They had made their way through all the streets in ones and twos, and it was only now, at the start of the Aleje Ujazdowskie, that they met up, glad to find their own. The actual reason for the march was as

The Coming Spring

follows: in one of the factories the workers had demanded a 50% raise. Since the management categorically refused, the general manager had been gently gripped by the arms and led into the yard, and from the yard he was escorted outside the gate. There a knee in the back invited him to go home and not hang around where he wasn't needed. The workers themselves assumed their positions by their machines, each in the place of his specialization. The factory was proclaimed to have been taken into the possession of a workers' council. For his part the owner of the factory announced that he was closing the factory indefinitely, and laying off all the workers. In response the workers declared that they would not allow the factory to be closed; they would do the work themselves and would not hand the place over to anyone else. Then the police surrounded the factory and ordered the workers' collective to come out of their own accord if they did not wish to be removed by force.

It was at this point that the leadership of the party demanded support from the community of workers. The demonstration surged out of the square and moved off toward the Belweder. In the front row of the sizeable crowd the leading ideologues, including Lulek and Baryka, walked along with linked arms. Baryka was in the very middle, wearing his army jacket and cap. They were singing.

Mounted police had just appeared in one of the side streets. An officer riding a magnificent horse, and wearing a rubber overcoat buttoned across his chest, led his skipping, leaping steed alongside the red and gray mass, which pressed together to form one body. The officer

The Wind from the East

stared intently at the leaders, especially the one in the army cap. When the throng was close to the Belweder palace itself, an infantry unit emerged from the guardhouse and stood blocking the street as if there had suddenly arisen a gray wall, an impenetrable barrier, an insurmountable barricade.

Baryka stepped out from the ranks of the workers and pressed forward alone, directly toward the gray wall of soldiers—at the head of the haggard crowd.

Konstancin, September 21, 1924



One of the great masterpieces of European fiction of the 20th century, *The Coming Spring* tells the story of Cezary Baryka, a young Pole living in Baku, Azerbaijan, as the Russian Revolution breaks out. He becomes embroiled in the chaos caused by the revolution, and barely escapes with his life. Then he sets off on a horrendous journey west and makes it to the newly independent Poland. Here he struggles to find his place. He wants to help his country; he sees the suffering of the poor and the working classes, yet his experiences in the newly formed Soviet Union make him deeply suspicious of socialist and communist solutions.

Żeromski paints a masterful portrait of the turmoil of the new country—the elation of independence sobered by the glaring social inequities found between classes. In rich, pithy, memorable language he describes both the hope and the agony of the times. His account of Polish society is deeply, painfully honest and brilliantly insightful.

Stefan Żeromski (1864–1925) is universally acknowledged as the most outstanding Polish novelist of his generation. He was a writer with a strong social conscience, taking up the concerns of the poor and downtrodden. Yet he did so with a poet's sensibility, and his novels, stories, and plays are superbly constructed works of art that constitute major accomplishments in European literature. In the 1920's Żeromski was a leading contender for the Nobel Prize for Literature; his candidacy was supported by Joseph Conrad, who was a fervent admirer of his work.

Central European University Press
Budapest – New York

Sales and information: ceupress@ceu.hu

Website: <http://www.ceupress.com>

